

ALFRED

MARCH 50¢ K

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the MASTER OF SUSPENSE

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March 1969



Dear Reader:

Winter is dying, someone remarked to me recently, and I thereupon attempted to ascertain the place of burial. I felt it was incumbent upon me to pay my last respects. After all, I had been very close to it for several months. Yet when I made inquiry, my sage informer frowned and retreated.

Having put this distraction in his place, I turned once again to the variety of business now set forth in these pages and was gratified to find genuine humor amid an all-new (as usual, without cessation) collection of mystery and suspense from the keen minds of a typically outstanding roster of writers.

If you should become imposed upon as I was while gripped by one of the talents herein, you might wish to try a harmless little game of substitution to abet the chills. Simply put the crasher into the story in place of an appropriate character, and your good reading will be enhanced accordingly.

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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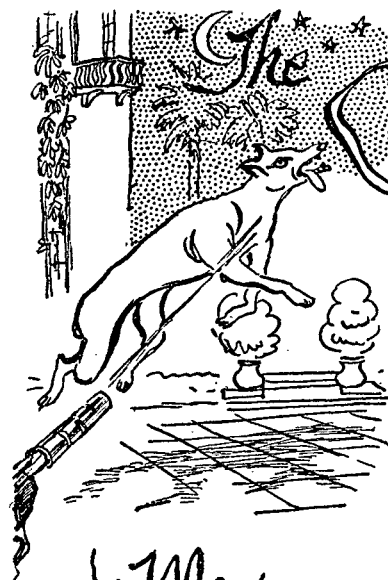
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Most debts must be repaid with interest, but occasionally recompense is acceptable in kind.



by Max
Van Derveer

The GAMBLER

remained crouched, unmoving, alert, the gun with its silencer attached gripped loosely in his hand. Only his ears and eyes were busy, his ears tuned for the warning growl, his eyes searching the geometrically terraced lawn for the swift moving shadow. Where was the dog?

He was not disappointed. As he left the iron fence, the huge shadow shot out from the second level terrace as if catapulted. Silhouetted against the stars, he made an easy target. The gun spit. The dog howled, writhed in flight, and then plopped at the young man's feet where it continued to struggle for a few seconds before stretching out in dead silence.

It was a few minutes past two o'clock on a quiet, warm, star-studded, California morning when the lithe young man scaled the iron fence and dropped to the rich turf of the mansion grounds. He

The young man hunched inside the shadow of the second terrace, pocketed the gun, and inventoried the massive house. The windows

remained black, but it was a full five minutes before he assumed the howl of the dog had not been heard. He stood confidently tall, adjusted the knot of his tie, and climbed the terraces to walk onto the swimming pool apron. Surveying the balcony above the pool, he saw the faint outline of the open French doors and he smiled.

He went up a vined lattice and swung over a railing to stand on the balcony. From this vantage he briefly admired the view of the city lights in the valley, then went through the open doors to stand in a bedroom. Sniffing against the faint scent of perfume, he stared down on the curled figure of the sleeping woman. She was alone in the large bed. She did not stir. Her soft snore was rhythmic.

The young man snapped on a bedside lamp and put a palm against the woman's mouth.

Mina Tilton lay rigid and thoroughly frightened. She made no attempt to struggle against the hand clamped across her mouth, but she was conscious of the rapid thumping of her heart and the man who held her captive. He was slender, tall, immaculate and manicured, in a gray suit, white shirt and deep maroon necktie, smelled of pine-scented lotion, and had the subtlest brown eyes she had ever seen in her forty-three years.

"You will not scream or cry out," he said. His voice was soft too, and his words were a statement, not a question.

Mina wanted to nod but she could not find the strength to move against the man's hand. Then, suddenly, she was free as the man stood erect, produced a flat, combination cigarette case and lighter, removed a cigarette, put it between her lips and held the flame. "Smoke," he said. "Relax. I am not here to harm you or to loot your home. My name is Chip." He turned and sat on the edge of her bed, lit a cigarette for himself.

"H-how did you get in here?" she managed.

"Through those open doors over there," he said simply.

"But there's York and—"

"York is your dog?"

"Yes!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Tilton. I had to kill York. I shot him."

She flinched. "Well, why didn't my alarm go off? There's an alarm system! If—"

"The doors are open," he repeated. "They are always open, right? I understand you have something against closed-in places. Elevators panic you. Your condition borders on claustrophobia, I believe."

"But the system is connected with the balcony railing!"

"Then it must not be functioning. Who else is in the house, Miss Tilton?"

"M-my secretary. No one else."

"And where is she sleeping?"

"In the other wing."

"Then she cannot hear us."

"N-no."

"Good." The young man smiled. "I do not want to be seen or heard."

"W-why are you here? Who are you? What—"

"Easy, Miss Tilton. I'm only here to collect a debt."

Mina lay unmoving in disbelief.

"Vegas," he said. "I represent a certain interest in Vegas. The Ocean Club, to be specific. You know the place. Glass wall in the gaming room, fish swimming behind the glass wall while another kind of sucker flounders on this side? You currently owe the Ocean Club \$150,000."

"What is this?" she cried out. "They've always carried me! They've—"

"But not to the tune of \$150,000 over three months, darling. You haven't been around in three long months."

"I've been committed! My clients! I haven't had time to—"

"When you've won, you haven't waited three months to pick up the green."

"But that was different! The

money was available on the table!"

"True. Well, you always can peddle this property, I suppose. It should bring \$150,000, probably better."

"No!" she protested.

"Doll, a certain man wants his money. He doesn't care how you get it."

"I won't put my home on the market!"

The young man sat in thought. "I see. Well, I guess I wouldn't either if I were in your position. It's a very nice home, but . . ."

Mina gathered courage. She got up on an elbow. "Look, you can't enter my home in the middle of the night! You can't demand—"

"I just did, Miss Tilton," the young man interrupted, "and I am demanding. Further, I have a proposition for you. If you will listen and then cooperate, I believe this matter can be resolved."

"I'm going to call the police!"

Mina reached for the bedside telephone. The young man's hand covered hers quickly, squeezed gently, but his smile was set now and the brown eyes had lost their softness. He butted his cigarette in an ashtray carefully, drew her hand away from the telephone. "We want you to set up a kidnapping of Sydney South," he said. "You are her agent. It should be easy for you."

Mina could not believe. The young man continued, "Sydney South is a hot piece of property at the moment. An actress in demand, as they say. Up for an Academy Award, and all that jazz. Think of the publicity you can get out of a kidnaping, Miss Tilton. Afterwards, there can be television shots, guest appearances, radio, the newspapers—not to mention sympathy, perhaps, at the Academy vote, and you can personally benefit. You work on a percentage, right? You take a percent of everything Sydney South brings in?"

"Y-you . . . you can't be serious!"

"Think about it, Miss Tilton; calmly. It's not such a crazy piece of action. You and your client get miles of publicity, and we get our hundred and fifty thou—from Lance South, Sydney's father."

"Lance!"

"You were married to him once, remember? He'll pay. He's got the green. Successful screen writer, wise business investor—and crazy about his daughter. Look, Miss Tilton, we knew all about Lance South. We know all about you, your marriage to him. We knew you and South married after Sydney's mother died. What did it last? Ten, eleven months before he threw you out of his house be-

cause you were costing him too much? Because you have streaks when you can't stay away from gaming tables—and some of the animals who go with gaming tables."

"How dare you!"

The young man sighed. "Miss Tilton, you like gambling, you like men. Okay. No reproach. We all have our weaknesses. Yours just happened to foul you up with Lance South. You got caught, you got thrown out of a house. Being cast off can't have left a sweet taste. Besides, there's this business about Lance South attempting to buy up his daughter's contract with you. Our understanding is you can't afford to lose Sydney South at any price and so far you've got the right legal beagles on your side. You've also got Sydney herself on your side, in spite of her father's contrary urgings. Sydney likes you, as an agent and as a friend, but will the cards remain stacked in your favor forever?"

"Lance South can never buy or break that contract!"

"The real point, Miss Tilton, is why should it bug you if Lance South has to put out \$150,000 to kidnapers of his daughter? Actually we're doing you a favor. We're giving you an out. We're resigned to the fact that you are strapped

at the present time. Yes, we know that about you, too. You live as if you can reach inside your purse and pay anything, but you can't. You're up to your ears in debt. You could even lose this house someday. It's that bad. So . . . well, here's an opportunity. Do you want it?"

Mina sought sense of direction. "Chip . . . that's what you said your name is? . . . Yes, well, Chip, I'm attempting to remain calm, accept as reality that you are here in my bedroom, that you are sitting on the edge of my bed, that you—"

"I'm very real, Miss Tilton. So is our proposition."

Mina lay back on the pillow and put a forearm across her eyes. She remained silent for several seconds, breathing deeply, and then she said, "Stop me, Chip, if I don't have this straight. You want me to place Sydney South in a position from which she can be easily kidnapped. You then will demand \$150,000 in ransom—the amount I owe the Ocean Club—from her father, Lance South. When you have your money I will be free of debt from said Ocean Club and Sydney will be freed by you people. Is that all there is to it?"

"There's the publicity, darling. Don't forget the publicity for your client."

"Ah, yes, publicity for Sydney. Miles of publicity for Sydney, I believe you said."

"Miss Tilton, you really are not in a position to quibble. My employer wants his money. If you can, at this moment, leave this bed, walk over there to that wall safe and produce \$150,000 cash, I will be most happy to—"

Mina lashed out, but the young man was quick. He caught her wrist and twisted her arm, bending her hand far up her back. He shot two stiff fingers into her solar plexus. She doubled. She suddenly felt as if her breathing had been cut off. She gulped and gasped repeatedly, and then she was conscious of being freed, of the young man standing to tower over her. He caught her hair in his hand, yanked her head back so that she was staring up at him.

"You have this day, doll," he rasped. "You set it up this day. And tonight at 10.30, straight up, you come to Unit 14, the Moonlite Motel, Highway 7. You walk in without knocking, and you tell me where and when we pick up Sydney South. No phone calls, to me or to the fuzz, or it's your funeral. Literally."

He released Mina roughly and she watched him go out the open French doors. She rolled on her back, groaned, tested her injured

middle. Gingerly, she sat up, drew deep breaths. She stared at the open doors. How could this have happened to her? She reached for the telephone. Suddenly the image of a dead Doberman was alive in her mind. She shivered. Her fingers worked against the telephone,

suddenly were moist. She fell back on the bed, writhed in the combination of physical hurt and mental reality. She seemed trapped. It was as if a huge vise were closing in on her and she did not have the strength to escape.

She left the bed, ran out onto



the balcony. The city lights glittered in the valley. She searched the terraces, but there were no moving shadows. She slumped against the balcony railing, stared without seeing. Then slowly she realized that she was leaning on the balcony railing, arched across it. If the switch were in position, the alarm should be sounding. But all she heard was silence.

She ran down into the interior of the house, flipping wall switches as she went. She found the master switch of the alarm system open. She slammed the switch into the "on" position, and then she flew off into the other wing of the house and rudely yanked a sleeping secretary from sleep.

"You are fired!" Mina screeched.

"W-what?" The secretary blinked owlishly, found large-rimmed glasses and planted them on her nose.

"Out!" Mina screamed. "This instant! You forgot to throw the alarm switch! And I told you specifically . . . I attempted to impress on you that it was your duty! Every night! I—"

"D-do we have a burglar in the house?" the secretary stammered.

Mina slammed palms against her forehead. "Dumb!" she shrieked. "Where have all the *smart* secretaries gone? One week you've been in this house, and what have I

told you every night? Throw the alarm switch at night!"

The secretary was suddenly out of the bed, standing tall. "Miss Tilton," she said icily, "I quit."

The morning light was gray, the air wet. Pink was yet to fill the eastern sky as Mina sat slouched in the webbed chair at poolside. Three crumpled cigarette packages dotted the pool apron. Her tongue felt raw. She coughed every two minutes, damned cigarettes, then lit a fresh one. She was beat now, so sleepy she harbored ideas of stretching out on the hard pool apron. Perhaps she would roll into the pool water in sleep. Perhaps she would drown without even knowing it. That would simplify everything.

She shuddered, entered the house and stretched out on a couch. She could roll from the couch and not be in danger. She had no desire to die, even if living meant putting a piece of livelihood and a friend in jeopardy.

It was noon of a bright, hot day when she awoke. She was hungry but she discovered she did not have a stomach for food or drink. She suddenly remembered York and she went out onto a terrace. The dog lay stretched out in the sunshine down near the iron fence. Mina's empty stomach gurgled and churned; she broke out in a sweat.

What was she to do with York? Who did you call when a dog died . . . was killed? How did you explain a bullet hole in a dog?

Mina became ill as she rolled York into the trunk of her car. She stood jackknifed against the side of the sedan for several seconds, but finally drove away from the house. Her hands quivered, she felt weak, she was alternately hot and then chilled, but the drive helped. The air washing against her through the open windows of the sedan was fresh and she inhaled deeply as she drove into the hills. She found a remote ravine and rolled the dog into it. Then she returned to the edge of the city, purchased two hamburgers and a malted at a drive-in and drove out along the Interstate and turned off onto a strip of sand. She ate, digested slowly, felt strength returning to her limbs. A young man named Chip: he knew so much about her. A debt: it was a weight, a worry. The kidnap plot: she had to admit someone was thinking. Lance: he could afford the \$150,000 ransom, and he would pay.

At exactly 10:30 that night, Mina braked the sedan in front of Unit 14 at the Moonlite Motel. A heavy drape had been drawn across the only window, but there was light behind it. She knocked. The door

remained closed. Frowning, she looked up and down the row of units and parked cars. She saw no one. The office was far off to her right. She tried the doorknob. It turned. She entered the unit, stood staring at the neat and silent emptiness. Her frown deepened. Was she at the right motel, inside the right unit? She turned, then gasped. Chip stood in the doorway. He was smiling, his brown eyes soft as they quickly inventoried her.

Mina knew sudden shock. Had she been hoodwinked? Had she been lured here on a ruse? Was she now to be attacked? She felt panic, wanted to scream.

"When, Miss Tilton," Chip asked, "and where?"

She turned from him, closed her eyes briefly, and drew a deep breath. She sat on the edge of the bed, found a cigarette in her purse. A tiny flame leaped alive from a lighter held for her. She glanced up at Chip, then accepted the light.

"Is . . . tomorrow too soon?" she managed.

"Excellent. Where?"

"Darcy's."

"Ah, the department store."

"Sydney has a personal appearance scheduled there."

"At what time will she finish?"

"Four o'clock."

"How will she leave the store?"

Mina explained the procedure to him.

"Beautiful," said Chip.

"Now there are a few things I want to know," Mina said bravely. "How will Lance be notified? Where will he pay? And Sydney, where will you take her? Where will you hold her? She can't be injured . . . molested . . . harmed in any way. I won't stand for that. I won't—"

"Darling," Chip interrupted, "I'm handling the details. All you have to do now is be at home at noon tomorrow. I expect to telephone you at noon."

"What for?"

His smile widened, but he shook his head. "Just be there, darling. Expect the call."

He left her and Mina sat for a few seconds caught up in the sudden silence that surrounded her. Then she leaped to the door but Chip was gone when she searched the motel area. She listened for the start of a car motor. There was none. She shook her head. *What was she doing to Sydney South? What danger, what fate was ahead for the beautiful and talented actress?*

The telephone rang at five minutes past twelve o'clock, noon, and Mina snatched up the receiver. Chip's words made her heart race:

"Everything's set," he said, sounding as if he had planned an afternoon beach party. "All you have to do is be sure your driver takes the route from the store that you outlined. After the pickup, of course, you will have a session with the cops. They'll fire questions at you from every side. Play it cool, baby. Keep the head. Answer the questions truthfully. Don't attempt to improvise. They'll trap you if you do. Give descriptions of the kidnapers, details. My boys aren't known here. Then tonight, after the cops let you cut out, come to the Sonic Hotel, sixth floor, Room 607. Make it by 9:30, and make it alone. But keep a sharp eye for the fuzz. *They could put a tail on you.*"

Mina almost broke in the next twenty-five minutes. Twice she reached for the telephone, then stilled her hand just inches from the receiver. The police could foil the kidnaping, all right, but could they prevent her death in the coming months?

Mina was forced to dash to be at the studio at one o'clock. Sydney, her sumptuous figure enhanced by wearing pink Sydney slacks and a white Sydney blouse, was radiant and filled with youthful enthusiasm. She kissed Mina's cheek, said, "Do you think we will draw a large crowd today, Mina?"

I feel as if I can autograph for hours. Ohhh, I get so excited when I think about all of those wonderful, crazy kids. They're wild, I mean simply wild. They—"

"They are fans, honey," Mina broke in flatly. "Your public. Money in the bank. Come on. We have to hustle. You are due at the store at two."

They rode in the chauffeured studio limousine. Sydney bubbled continuously. Mina remained silent. Then suddenly Sydney startled Mina by asking, "What's the matter, Mina? Why are you so quiet?"

"It's nothing, baby." Mina patted Sydney's hand, attempted to smile. "It's the Academy. I'm thinking about the Academy."

"I want the Oscar, Mina."

"Sure you do, baby, and I want it for you. You'll get it. You can't miss. By the way, is your father in town?"

"Wha . . . Well, certainly. He's working on a new script. Don't you remember? I told you the other day. And you know Father. When he works, he works. He doesn't even leave the house."

"Yes, yes," Mina said quickly. "I remember. You did tell me."

She felt she might have erred. On the other hand, what if Lance South were back East, in New York, for instance? What if there was the kidnaping and then no

one to demand ransom from? Mina shook her head. Chip was thorough. He'd already proven that much. Chip knew where Lance South was. He probably even knew what scene Lance was wrestling with in his new script.

"Mina?"

"Yes, baby?"

Sydney South was frowning. "Why did you ask about Father?"

Mina patted Sydney's hand again, turned on a new smile. "I need to talk to him one of these days. Something personal, honey."

"I wish you two could have made a go of it," Sydney said.

The divorce had been swift, silent. Sydney and the world had been spared the lurid details.

Mina kept the smile. "We couldn't, honey. It's best this way, honest."

Sydney was a sensation in the Teen Shop at Darcy's Department Store. The kids pressed in, reached. They wanted to touch her, take home a strip of Sydney blouse, Sydney slacks. They wanted a souvenir of having been *that* close to Sydney South. It was a nerve-racking two hours for Mina. In addition to the ear-splitting noise that brought on a throbbing headache, there was the sensation that the walls were pressing in, that the sea of faces surrounding them was constantly drifting in closer and soon

would smother her or crush her.

Salvation came with four o'clock, and none too soon. Mina was at the breaking point. She needed fresh air, freedom, open spaces, and she elbowed roughly as she guided Sydney through the throng of admirers and finally into the sanctity of a dressing room in the back of the store.

Mina, opening the back door slightly, saw the limousine in the alley. She drew a long breath of relief and turned to Sydney. "Okay, honey. Clear sailing. Let's dash."

They scrambled into the back seat of the limousine and the driver rolled just as the howling mob of kids turned into the alley ahead of them. The driver eased through the mob expertly and turned into the street.

"Weren't they wonderful?" Sydney exclaimed.

"Kids," muttered the driver. "They're nuts."

He braked for a red traffic light, and out of the corner of her eye Mina saw two young men vacate the back seat of a sedan parked at the curb. A third young man remained at the steering wheel of the sedan. All wore rubber Halloween masks.

The back door of the limousine was jerked open and Sydney South was yanked outside. She screamed. Mina cursed. Their driver yelled,

"Hey . . ." and then one of Sydney's abductors leaned inside and smashed the muzzle of a gun across the driver's skull. The mask swung around to Mina. She imagined the grin behind it. The abductor reached up, patted her cheek lightly, "Ta-ta." Then he turned and pitched into the back seat of the sedan, and the sedan squealed across the intersection, moved swiftly out of sight.

The police detectives were polite, considerate, and seemed to work with quiet efficiency. Within two hours they had the kidnaping pieced together, had decided it was the work of professionals, had found a sidewalk witness who was able to give them the license number of the sedan used by the abductors, had found the sedan to be a stolen vehicle, had listened to Mina and the limousine driver, had calmed several studio representatives, had summoned and talked to Lance South, had held a news conference with the newspaper, television and radio reporters, were already gently fending off telephone calls from cranks who professed to have snatched that "hot-lookin' movie star", and now were politely attempting to allay a lurking suspicion.

"It's something, Miss Tilton," the detective sergeant named Andrews said carefully, "we are forced to

consider in this kind of case. Is all of this a hoax?"

Mina was alone in a tiny office with the detective. She thought him a handsome, rugged, straight-from-the-shoulder man; he appealed, but his frankness also was disturbing. She was not sure he could be hoodwinked.

"Publicity," he continued. "Sydney South's name and, where possible, photographs have already made every news outlet in the country. You understand my position, I trust."

"Can you open a window, Sergeant?"

Andrews looked mildly surprised.

"It's me," Mina said quickly. "I have a terrible headache and tiny rooms disturb me. An open window helps."

Andrews opened the window behind his desk and then produced a bottle of tablets from a drawer. He went out into the squad room, returned with a paper cup of water. "Help yourself to the tablets," he said. "There isn't a day around here I don't have some kind of headache."

Mina took two tablets. In a sense, she was afraid of Andrews. He had a keen mind, and he seemed experienced in his work. She remembered Chip's advice, and she attempted to play the game as straight

as she could. She said, "It is not a hoax, Sergeant. I'm afraid this is for real. Very real."

"You are Sydney South's agent," he said. "It's why I had to ask you."

"We are not in the process of making Sydney. She already is made."

"Then we must consider ransom. Who will be asked to pay the ransom? You? Her father? The studio?"

"I'll suggest the studio."

"Why?"

"It's where Sydney is the most valuable."

"More valuable than to her father?"

"Well, no. Certainly not. Not in one sense. But if you are thinking strictly in terms of dollars and cents, the studio is—"

"I understand you and Lance South were once man and wife."

"Yes."

"Can he afford to pay ransom?"

"Certainly."

"Can you?"

"I could manage . . . a certain amount."

"Sometimes it's difficult to tell who has what these days, Miss Tilton. You can assume a man is capable of buying the White House, but in reality he might be incapable of producing the price of a baseball ticket."

"Some people live that way, yes."

But not the great Lance South."

"All right, Miss Tilton. That's it for the present."

"I'm free to go?"

"Unless there is something else you want to tell me."

"No," Mina said quickly. "You surprised me, that's all. It seems rather an abrupt ending to—" She stopped, fumbled for words.

Andrews' sudden smile put her off balance. "To an inquisition?"

She clasped her purse, looked directly at him. "On film a police interrogation is different."

"On film," he countered, "there are guiding factors—a script and a director." He smiled.

Mina walked out of the police station feeling as if she had just been forced to accept bankruptcy. She was lost, insecure, not sure of anything. She entered a small cocktail lounge, had two drinks. The drinks got to her fast, made her lightheaded. Then she remembered she had not had dinner. She left the lounge, debated, decided she could not eat. It was only ten minutes to eight, too early to go to Chip at the hotel. She recalled his warning about being trailed by a policeman so she pretended to window shop, but she saw no one who might be following her. She went to a movie, stopped in the lobby and inventoried the customers who had followed her inside. She took a seat,

waited thirty minutes, then left. Again she stopped in the lobby. No face coming from the darkness of the theater was familiar. She walked to the hotel and entered the elevator at five minutes past nine o'clock. She was early, but she was at nerve's end too. Dallying was bringing back the headache.

Room 607 was halfway down a long, empty corridor. She stood outside the door, listened hard. Then she reached for the knob and froze. Movement in the corner of her eye filled her with panic. A man was approaching.

It was Chip, smiling. He opened the door and ushered her into the room. "You weren't followed," he said. "I was in the lobby, watching."

Mina sank into a chair, lit a cigarette.

"How were the cops?" Chip asked. "Bad session?"

"There's one, a sergeant named Andrews. It won't surprise him if all of this is a hoax. What have you done with Sydney? Is she here in the hotel? Is she—"

"She's okay. The boys know what they are doing. And Lance South is set. He's putting the green together now. He won't bring in the cops. He wants his daughter returned alive."

"You've already talked to him?"

"Thirty minutes ago. He's a cool

customer. Took it standing up, no hysterics, no demands, no threats. Just asked for a little time. Said he needed a couple of hours to gather that kind of cash. It figures."

Mina leaped to her feet. "My God . . . is he going to bring the money here? He'll see me! He'll—"

"Easy, darling. No, he isn't bringing the money. You're going to pick it up."

"Mel!"

"At eleven tonight Lance South will drive along the Sea Trail above the Interstate. You're familiar with it, I'm sure. You know how little used it is anymore. He'll only have one headlight so you can be sure it is he. You'll have a flash, blink it. He will drop the package without stopping. If there is another car on the road, you beat it. If there is not, you pick up the package and bring it here. It's that simple, baby."

"N-no . . ." Mina stuttered. "N-not me. I . . . I can't! I'm already frightened out of my wits!"

"You, honey," Chip said flatly. "Eight miles out on the Sea Trail. Eleven p.m. sharp. There's a turn-around road near where you'll be. You'll have your car in there, but you will be hidden along the trail."

"No . . ." Mina continued to protest.

"It's gotta be, doll," Chip said. "After all, you could have tipped the cops already. You could have

formed a pact with your ex. Maybe your ex and the cops are putting together a plan at this very moment. Do you want me out there on the trail—if and when the fuzz swoop down?"

Mina was as frightened as she had ever been in her life. Her heart raced, her blood pounded, her head throbbed, and she was perspiring profusely in spite of a chilly wind as she huddled against the huge boulder. Below was the Interstate and the Pacific, and off in the distance was the glitter of the city. Car lights whisked along the highway; the sea was black. Above her was the rugged Sea Trail, carved out of the hillside years before. From where she was crouched, it was impossible to see along the trail, but when she braced a foot against the boulder and stood, her eyes were on a level with the roadway.

She heard the approach of the car long before she saw the single headlight. She listened hard. Had she heard a second car motor? She stood, blinked the flashlight several times, then slid around the boulder. If the car stopped, she planned to slide on down the sharp incline to the Interstate. She could hide along the highway all night if necessary. She might even plunge into the ocean, swim down the shoreline to safety.

The car slowed above her, then moved on; but it was a long time before she dared to put her head out from behind the boulder. In the darkness the only sound was the wind. She stared up at the trail. Nothing moved up there. She went up the incline cautiously, lay against the road edge. Her eyes searched along the trail. Where was the package? She had to risk using the flash. She played the light in a quick, swooping arc, saw the bundle. A tiny cry escaped her throat as she snatched up the package and ran to where she had left her car in the turn-around. She was prepared to scream. If a hoarse shout descended on her, if an invisible hand came out of the blackness to clamp her shoulder, she would become a screaming maniac.

She drove recklessly down the trail, moving too fast and taking the corners too wide. But speed was escape now, and she was so close. She pushed the sedan, alternately stomping on the accelerator, slamming her foot against the brake pedal. The city lights below grew larger, brighter. Then she rounded a curve, screamed, and jammed a foot against the brake pedal. The rear end of the sedan came around, brushed the high side of the trail. The car bounced. She fought for control.

Suddenly she was stopped and



frozen to the steering wheel as she stared at the convertible that had been parked to block the road. Chip stepped into the glare of her headlights and jogged toward her. She put her forehead against the steering wheel and moaned.

Chip sat half in and half out of her car while he tore open the package. He counted the banded stacks of bills swiftly. Then he grinned and lifted the money. "One hundred and fifty thou, doll. You're out of debt. How does it feel?"

Mina stared down at the bills left in the package on the seat. "W-what's . . . that?"

Chip's grin widened. "A little something extra, baby. For you. It should be fifty thou. I told your ex we wanted two hundred thousand dollars, and he complied."

"But . . ."

Chip started to leave. "See yuh, doll. Sydney will be home inside the hour."

"But I don't want money!" Mina shrieked.

Chip was moving away from her. "So pitch it into the Pacific," he said over his shoulder.

Then he was inside the convertible and the car swung out of Mina's path. She watched him back around and the red taillights disappear.

With quivering fingers, Mina counted the money for the third time. \$50,000! What was she to do with it? The money frightened her; it seemed so incriminating.

She left her bed, walked out onto the balcony, stood staring down on the quiet of the pool water. Had Sydney been released? Why hadn't Sydney telephoned?

Mina reentered the bedroom, looked at the telephone, put the money in the wall safe. The phone jangled. She jumped, then raced to it.

"Mina?" Sydney sounded excited. "Mina, darling, I'm home!" she shouted.

"Baby! Are you all right?"

"Fine. Fine. Just excited. Terribly excited."

"Are you injured? Did those men—"

"I'm fine, Mina. No one touched me. Father paid two hundred thousand dollars ransom! Imagine! Two hundred thousand!"

"Where are you now, baby? At the police—"

"At home. With Father. The police are here. And the doctor is coming over. I don't need the doctor, but Father has insisted."

"Can I see you?"

"Well . . . just a minute." Sydney left the line. Mina heard nothing.

Then a male voice was in her ear. "Sergeant Andrews here, Miss Tilton."

"Yes, Sergeant?"

"You can see Miss South in the morning."

"Not now?"

"There's much to be done, Miss Tilton, and we already have confusion. In the morning."

"Well . . ."

"Please?"

"All right, Sergeant."

Mina did not sleep. She felt exhausted, but her eyes would not remain closed and her mind was too busy. The money in the wall safe worried her. What if Sergeant Andrews asked to see inside her

safe? But why would he ask? What could possibly lead him to her? Still, she had to get rid of the money, get it out of her house. Did she dare discard it, burn it? Crazy! That was \$50,000! Her bank safety deposit box! Why not? There would be no record of deposit, and only she could enter the box.

She dressed at mid-morning, put the money in a briefcase and drove downtown to the bank. She was alone in the small basement room and quickly removing the bills to put them inside the open box when the voice said, "Miss Tilton?"

She yelped and spun. Sergeant Andrews stood inches from her, his face set, his eyes busy. She expected him to have a gun in his hand, but he stood before her solid, unmoving, frightening, and empty-handed.

"Come with me, Miss Tilton," he said. "And bring the money. All of it."

She expected to find Chip in custody. She expected to see three men—without their masks. She expected to be greeted by a confused Sydney. But when she was escorted into the police station squad room she saw only Lance South seated alone on a wooden bench outside the work area and four detectives at desks inside the railing.

Lance stood, stared, his fleshy face slightly flushed, his blue eyes

accusing. He was impeccably dressed, looked freshly combed, as usual, a large man, going a bit soft in body these days, but hard as cobalt in mind and attitude.

Sergeant Andrews waved him down. "In a few minutes, Mr. South." He escorted Mina through the railing gate, passed her briefcase to a detective with a significant look, and piloted her on into his office. He did not bother to open a window this time and Mina knew an immediate closed-in feeling as she sat on the edge of the chair in front of the desk.

Andrews said, "Begin, Miss Tilton. Tell me how you arranged to have Sydney South kidnaped, who you hired to do the job, where I can find these people, and why you endangered the girl's life to extort two hundred thousand dollars from your former husband."

Mina gasped. She was quivering. "S-Sergeant . . . I didn't . . . didn't do those things."

Andrews found a pencil on his desk, twirled it. "Lance South thinks you did. And you were carrying a large sum of money to your safety deposit box this morning. Just how much money, Miss Tilton?"

"Fif . . . Well, fifty thousand! I assume one of your men is counting it at the moment. But it's *my* money, Sergeant. Savings! Too

much to keep in a wall safe in my home!"

"I see. Fifty thousand, eh? And where is the other hundred and fifty thousand? Already in Las Vegas?"

"Sergeant, I—"

"Miss Tilton," he interrupted, "I think we can save time if I tell you what I already know. I know, for instance, that you have had a gambling debt at a club in Vegas. The Ocean Club. I know that debt was one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. I know that in recent months your financial structure has suffered. I have also been *told by Lance South* that it was a woman who telephoned him last night and demanded two hundred thousand dollars for the safe return of his daughter. I also have a woman in another office who says she recently was hired and fired by you. She was your secretary for approximately one week, I believe. A week is not a long time, but your former secretary assures me she saw enough to realize that you are in financial difficulty. Then there is a man, Chip Henderson. He also is waiting in another office, and he tells me he represents the Ocean Club in this area. He is the club's public relations man, arranges flights to Vegas, motel accommodations, et cetera. But point, Miss Tilton: Mr. Henderson also in-

forms me that you, last night, called him from a party and gave him a hundred and fifty thousand dollars cash to pay off your Ocean Club debt. Mr. Henderson further assures me that amount has been deposited in a club account in a local bank. I've checked. It has been. It was deposited this morning and Mr. Henderson *was* called by a woman from the party last night. I've talked to others who were at the party, including the host and the maid who took the call for Mr. Henderson. Now, how about you taking it from there?"

"Is . . . Lance actually accusing me?" Mina managed.

"He thought it unusual to receive a ransom demand from a woman. I don't agree that it is *unusual*, but—"

"You listened to him," Mina broke in.

"Naturally."

"You know he hates me. You know he will do anything to ruin me."

"I understand that you were, at one time . . . er, promiscuous. In Mr. South's opinion, of course."

"And if I said I was not?"

Andrews concentrated on the pencil. "That, then, is a matter for conjecture, and will be investigated if pertinent to the kidnaping."

"Then it is his word against mine."

"The charge of promiscuity? Yes."

"The charge of kidnaping, Sergeant!"

"Mr. South has made an accusation. Mr. Henderson has supplied something that tends to substantiate the accusation—at least, give it credulity. I went out to your home this morning to present both to you, listen to your explanation of paying off your debt in cash, in a lump sum, on the same night that South paid a ransom. I found you leaving your house hurriedly. I was curious, followed you, saw you placing a large sum of money in a—"

"This man Chip set it up, Sergeant."

His expression didn't change. "I'm listening."

She explained. The words rushed out. Andrews did not interrupt. When she had finished, he telephoned the Moonlite Motel, then the desk at the Hotel Sonic. Finally he put the phone down, and his look chilled Mina. He said, "Unit 14 at the Moonlite was taken by a woman. Room 607 at the Sonic also was reserved by a woman."

Mina felt whipped. She sat for a long time in thought and silence. Then it began to fall together for her: Chip's knowledge of her, the killing of the dog York, the alarm system that had been left open, a

secretary who had been planted and had supplied the needed information about the house, the putting together of \$200,000 in cash on short notice, the lie to police about a woman demanding the ransom.

She asked, "May I see Mr. South, Sergeant? Alone?"

"Why?"

"May I?"

He hesitated, then left the office.

Lance South appeared. He looked smug and amused. "Mina," he said in greeting.

"Don't do this to me, Lance," she pleaded. "Please."

"I believe I asked the same of you once. But you had to have your Vegas. You had to have your . . . companionship."

"You put the girl who professes to be a secretary inside my home. You sent Chip."

"Did I?"

"Do you own the Ocean Club now, Lance? Is that one of your recent investments?"

"Find it on paper, Mina."

"Please, Lance."

"I'm a gambler, too, dear. I gamble that some plots are good, will sell. But it doesn't always have to be for money."

"Lance, they'll put me in prison! I'll be confined in a cell! A little block of a room, no windows—"

"Beautiful," he breathed. "Your just dues."

*Blazing neons can always transform night into day, but luck
is not so easily conjured.*



*by Malcolm
Thompson*



I FINISHED my eight hour custodial shift at the Golden Bonanza and stepped out into the searing, summer sunlight of Las Vegas' Casino Center. All day I'd collected cigarette butts, emptied paperbaskets and cleaned restrooms, while watching the big money being won or dropped at the crap tables. It was the only work a broken-down,

battered-faced pug—and paroled stickup artist—could get. Gambling Boss Maxie Roberts, who had admired me as an up-and-coming young fighter, had given me the job out of pity, saying, "I hope you learned your lesson on that stick-up game, Pug. These Vegas casinos are better guarded than Fort Knox."

For six months I'd been playing square, earning my ten bucks a day, and picking up a cheap jug of wine on my way home to my

dingy one room in North Las Vegas, but today, as I elbowed my way among the well-heeled, gawking tourists on Fremont Street, I wondered how much longer I could last. Being broke in Las Vegas was like dying of thirst in the middle of a lake.

I edged into a liquor store and stopped in front of a nickle slot. Now and then, I'd hit a five-dollar pot this way and treat myself to a highball. This time, I lost five nickles before angrily slamming the handle down.

"Someday, you're gonna break a handle that way, Pug," complained the liquor clerk, wrapping up my half-gallon of port.

"When I do," I growled, "you can buy a new one with all the nickles I've put in it."

When I got off the bus in front of my decrepit rooming house, a few seedy bums lounged on the rickety porch, watching me speculatively as I approached.

"Hey, Pug," one said, "how 'bout a slug of sneaky pete?"

"Go panhandle your own," I told him. This always shut them up. They never fooled with me much; I had laid too many of them out.

Upstairs, I locked myself in my eight-by-ten rattrap and opened my jug of wine. Sitting on my bed, I leaned back against the wall, raised the jug easily with one huge mitt

and let the sweet, warm, tangy liquid gurgle down my throat. Then, sighing, I set the jug on a nightstand and lit a cigarette. The warm wine spread a hot glow through my stomach and began working upward. Soon I would forget this squalid world around me—but I would start to remember, too. I'd remember the plush days, the easy days of beautiful women, unlimited money and admiring fans, but inevitably I'd end up remembering how it all ended with that terrible, nightmarish beating I took that night in Madison Square Garden.

Six months of hospitalization left me without resources or friends. My serious head injuries precluded a ring comeback. That was when, out of desperation, I pulled the hijacking caper.

I sighed again and reached for my jug. It had been easy for the cops to nail a bumbling first-timer like me!

As I tilted the jug, a big cockroach ran halfway down the stained wall across from me and paused, his long feeler-whiskers moving back and forth exploratively. Quickly setting my bottle on the floor, I lurched up into a fighter's crouch. This was a ritual I played each day with the cockroaches. Hunching my shoulders and bobbing my head, I slowly danced across the room, snorting

and shadowboxing, keeping my eyes on the cockroach. As I drew near he suddenly ran, but my left darted out and smashed him against the wall—only, this time, I put too much shoulder into it and my fist cracked the flimsy plaster.

“Hey, look out!” yelled the occupant of the adjoining room. “It ain’t right, Pug. You hadn’t oughta scare me thataway.”

Feeling better now, I threw down another slug of sneaky pete, grabbed a towel hanging on a nail in the wall, and headed down the hall to the bathroom. Flinging open the door, I saw the drunk lying asleep in the tub. I jerked him up and threw him out in the hall, where he lit running.

The bath didn’t help much. When I got back in my room and started hitting the bottle of Dutch courage again, I knew I would have to do something big—there had to be a way out of this cheap existence. The bighouse was better than this.

I drank again and stared at the near-empty jug. What this man needs, I mused, is money. Yeah, big money; like, for instance, the fifty grand that the rich oilman won at the dice table today. Of course, he probably dropped it at the next casino down the street. But I wouldn’t drop it, not me! I’d get just enough . . . say, thirty grand;

then I’d quit! I really would quit!

That’s when I thought of Charlie Lazolla. Fat Charlie owned a little haberdashery around the corner from the Golden Bonanza. The crafty skinflint had loaned me money before—at 100% interest. I’d pay him back twenty for lending me ten. A few days ago he had let me have fifty, and now I would have to give him all of my next paycheck.

I killed the last of the wine and my mind was made up. Charlie would have to finance my big gambling venture, like it or not.

I put on a white shirt, tie, my best sport coat, and walked downstairs to a phone booth. When Charlie heard me on the line, he quickly guessed what I wanted and said he was getting ready to close.

“Okay, Charlie,” I casually replied, “I was just going to drop by and give you your hundred clams.”

“What! You got the hundred? You haven’t been paid yet . . .”

“I won a thousand on a perfect six-spot keno ticket.”

“Say, that’s great, Pug! You come on by with the dough. I’ll lock up and wait for you.”

I boarded a bus and headed uptown. Thanks to the wine, I was feeling no pain. I guess a man would have to be feeling no pain to try to con two thousand clams out of Charlie Lazolla, but an ex-

con, down on his luck and half full of booze, will try anything.

When I got off the bus downtown, the gigantic, complex, neon-signs, fired by a billion watts of power, had conjured the night into blazing day. Gay throngs filled the sidewalks, laughing, talking, shouting, living it up in the bright-light city that never sleeps.

I hurried to Charlie's place, located between a pawnshop and a newsstand, both of which had closed for the night. Charlie had turned on his night lights, but when he saw me he opened the nightlock and let me in.

"Pug," he chortled, his beady eyes aglow with that familiar greedy, hungry look.

I followed him as he walked behind his counter into his little office in the rear of the store. "Hope I didn't hold you up long."

"No, Pug, no trouble at all. I just called my wife and told her good old Pug was coming by to pay up, and I'd be a little late."

"You told her I was coming?"

"Sure, Pug. Anything wrong with that?"

"Well, uh . . ." I hesitated, wondering how to tell him. "You see, Charlie, I haven't got the hundred."

Charlie slowly turned around, facing me. His eyes went wide and mean, while his little fish mouth opened to show bared teeth. "What

did you say?" he whispered, inching toward me. Suddenly he screamed, "*What did you say?* Why, you broken down pug! You crummy bum! You dare play games with *me*? Why, you sleazy wino, *get out of here!*"

Unbidden, my left shot out into that sneering mouth. Charlie must have weighed over two hundred, but even so, the force of my punch lifted him over his desk and landed him in a heap against the wall.

"You crazy creep!" he yelled, making a dive for his phone.

I was quicker. I intercepted him and planted a hard right into his fat, soft paunch. The air went out of him like a collapsed lung, and I grabbed him and slammed him up against the wall.

I was mad now, and my plan was forgotten. I was just interested in this fat miser who took me for my petty wages and then sneered at me. I held him against the wall with my left hand and worked him over with my right, backhanding him, kidney punching him, jabbing his ribs, and then slapping his head back and forth some more.

He got enough breath back to start begging. "Please . . . Pug . . ." His heavy breathing came in gasps. "You're killing me! I didn't mean what I said . . ."

I hit him again.

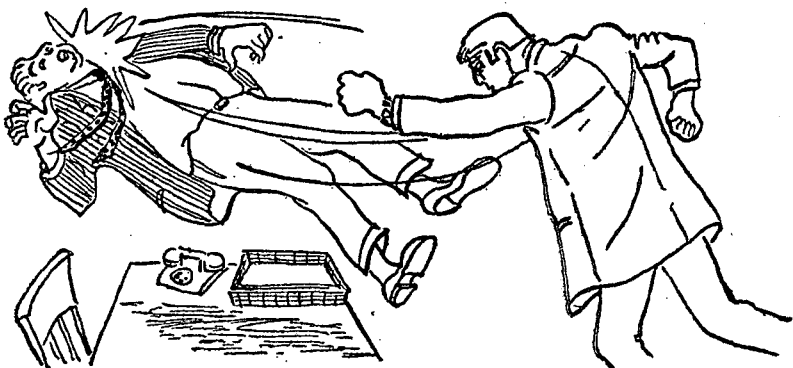
"No! No! Please . . . look Pug,

I'll do anything . . . Hey, I got more money, right there in the safe! You want to borrow more money, Pug?" He was eager now, seeing me pause with my fist. "How much you need? Four hundred? Five hundred?" He was now the big salesman; only he was bargaining

thousand-dollar bills out of it, trying to keep me from seeing the rest.

"Don't worry," I growled. "I just want the two grand."

He seemed slightly relieved. "All right, Pug," he sighed. "Take it and leave."



for his hide, not just for money.

I made my voice cold and hard. "I want to borrow two thousand dollars."

"Two thousand!" he screamed, trying to squirm free from my grip and reach his phone. "You're crazy!"

My right caught him hard between the eyes, bouncing his head off the wall.

Now he was blubbering. "Awright," he gasped. "Awright . . . I'll get it . . ."

I let him go and he staggered over to the safe, breathing hard. When he got it open, he took out a small metal box and raked two

"Not so fast, Charlie my boy."

"What's wrong?" He slammed the safe shut. "You take your time, Pug. I'll just be getting along . . ."

"Not so fast, Charlie." I grabbed him and shoved him into a chair. "You're gonna stay here till I get back." I spotted a big carton of nylon hose outside the office door. Using the hose, I tied him securely, hand and foot. "I won't be gone long, and when I get back I'm going to give you your dough back, with interest."

Charlie looked surprised. I wadded up one of the nylons and shoved it into his mouth. Wrapping another one around his head,

I then tied the gag firmly in place.

"Yep, Charlie, I'm going to multiply your capital. And I'm gonna pay you back 100% interest—your two thousand plus two thousand more. Ain't that the way we do business?"

Charlie couldn't talk, but his eyes took on that bright, greedy look. He nodded his head eagerly. Charlie was the type who could study the Wall Street Journal while languishing in a beartrap. "And maybe I'll throw in another thousand for, uh . . . putting you through such a strain during our . . . business transaction. Okay, Charlie?" I said.

He nodded, eyes shining.

"Of course, if I lose, I'll be on the lam and your wife will have to let you loose. But I won't lose. I feel lucky!" I ran my hands through his pockets and came up with the key to his shop. "One thing more, Charlie. After the payoff, I know you won't run to the cops." I grinned in his face. "Because they would call that extra three grand bribe money, Charlie. They would say I gave you the three grand as a bribe to keep you from reporting a felony, get it? And then they would take that three grand away from poor old Charlie."

I carefully looked up and down the street before letting myself out

the door of Charlie's haberdashery. Then I headed once again toward the glaring, day-bright brilliance that was Fremont Street.

I walked through a side entrance into the plush, Hilmont Hotel gambling casino. Hurrying through what seemed like an acre of slot machines, I came to the long, green-felt dice tables. Here, the high rollers held forth; there was no house limit. I paused, looking things over. Four of the tables had games going and resounded with the familiar click of dice, the stickman's call, and the shouts of the rollers.

I found a place at one end of a table. On my right, big Diamond Sam was shooting.

Sam was a colorful, local character. He wore diamonds on most of his fingers, was fabulously rich, and was known in all the casinos in Vegas as a high roller. He now bounced the dice down the table, yelling, "Baby!" They came up craps and Sam grunted disgustedly.

I was next, and the stickman said, "You in the game, mister?" I reached for the big red dice which he shoved toward me. Taking Charlie's two thousand-dollar bills out of my wallet, I dropped them on the pass line. The two dealers and boxman now perked up with interest.

A big grin spread over Diamond Sam's face. "Now, maybe we gonna have us one of them fun games," he chuckled, and a low murmur ran around the table as I started shaking the dice in my big, rough paw.

"Be good, now!" I threw the galloping dominos down the table, skipping, skittering, to bounce off the back wall. One dice stopped, showing six, while the other spun on its corner like a top. It stopped on five.

"Eleven!" shouted the stickman. "Pay the winner eleven!"

The boxman took a small house voucher and wrote \$2,000 on its face. He handed it to a dealer who carefully placed it on my two thousand-dollar bills. They waited for me to pick up something, but I said, "Let 'er ride." A louder murmur ran around the table and people started gathering, craning their necks to see the table's shooting surface.

"Woowee!" yelled Diamond Sam. "If this cat gonna shoot fo, I gonna shoot one!" He pulled out his wallet and threw a thousand on the pass line.

I shook the dice as hard as I could and let them go, yelling, "Roll!" and Diamond Sam yelled, "Yes! Yes!" The ruby red dice skipped down the bright green felt, scattering a bet of dollar chips.

They stopped, showing a four and a three.

"Seven! Seven!" yelled the stickman. "Pay seven!"

The boxman wrote a four thousand dollar voucher and the dealer dropped it on my pile. "Let 'er ride," I answered their inquiring gazes.

"Woowee!" yelled Sam, picking up his thousand bucks, but betting his thousand dollar voucher. "You is something else!"

Play had slowed on the other tables as the players watched our action. The four-deep crowd around my table was hushed as I rattled the dice loudly in my fist.

"Do right!" I yelled, casting the dice. "I mean!" echoed Sam as the bounding, clicking, red cubes danced to a stop.

"Seven! Seven! Seven, the winner!" The stickman's voice vibrated with tension. The voice of the crowd rose to a wild clamor. When the boxman was through, I had sixteen thousand dollars riding on the pass line.

"Quit!" someone yelled.

"Pick some up!" screamed another.

But I was boss here, and I'd made up my mind before I started. "Let 'er ride!"

"Woowee!" screamed Diamond Sam. "Woowee!"

I could now hear low voices

humming throughout the casino: "Sixteen thousand . . . man betting sixteen thousand . . . sixteen thousand."

I shook the dice and felt the hundreds of straining, burning eyes boring in on me. "Do something!" I roared, and sent the twin red squares scampering down the table.

People jostled, necks stretched desperately, trying for a look at the dice on the table.

"Four! Four! The point is four!" The stickman's voice was relieved and the crowd shouted in disappointment. A stab of fear knifed through me. Now the house had a chance to bust me.

"You can do it, baby!" screamed Sam. "I *knows* you can do it!"

My fist felt weak when I began shaking it. The crowd went silent and I saw the housemen grin, waiting for a seven to show.

"Go, big dice!" I threw. I could feel my heart jumping with the flying dice, and my stomach knotted.

"Eight! Eight! A hard-way eight!"

I brushed sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. The excitement around the table was thick enough to slice. I picked up the dice. I could almost see that seven coming up at me, and the dealer scooping up my sixteen thousand.

Diamond Sam provided encouragement. "You can do it, baby! I *beggin'* you, and I *tellin'* you! One little fo you gonna roll, heah?"

I closed my eyes and threw with all my might. Whack! The dice hit the end of the table and ricocheted. I jumped three feet and the crowd roared as the stickman shouted, "Four! Four! Four, the point, wins!"

The boxman slowly scrawled \$16,000 on a voucher and placed it on my pile. The crowd chattered wildly.

"What you gonna do now, baby?" Sam laughed happily as he scooped up his winnings.

"Quit," I replied quietly, reaching for my pile.

"You gonna *what*?" roared Sam.

"Are you cashing in, sir?" asked the boxman.

"That's right," I said, gathering up my thirty-two thousand. "I'm finished. Through. Kaput!"

"Good luck, Sam," I grinned, slapping his shoulder. "I got to rest a while."

"Sho!" said Sam. "Sho! See you again."

He wouldn't, I knew.

I headed toward the cashier and gave him the thirty thousand dollars worth of vouchers, showing him Charlie's two thousand-dollar bills. "Give me thirty more just like these," I said.

"Yes, sir! Yes, sir! Got a little lucky, did you, sir?"

"Just a little," I replied.

The cashier counted the money twice before giving it to me. It made my old wallet bulge and I shoved it into my front pocket and held my hand over it tightly as I pushed through the people to the street.

Moving up Fremont, I was seized with a wild joy. I was flush again! I could start living again! I had only to settle with old skinflint Charlie. He would be tickled out of his shoes to get his grasping clutches on that five thousand!

I took out his key and, making sure I wasn't noticed, let myself in the door of his shop. Then I walked quickly to the back of the store. "Charlie!" I called. "I'm back, Charlie!"

I walked into his office and came to an abrupt halt. Charlie still sat tied to his chair, which was wedged in a corner, but his head was slumped on his chest. Charlie had fallen asleep.

"Charlie, wake up! I got your dough!" Charlie didn't move and

a feeling of alarm shot through me as I bent over him. I raised his head and was horrified to see his blue-black face. Cold fear knifed through me. He'd choked on his gag!

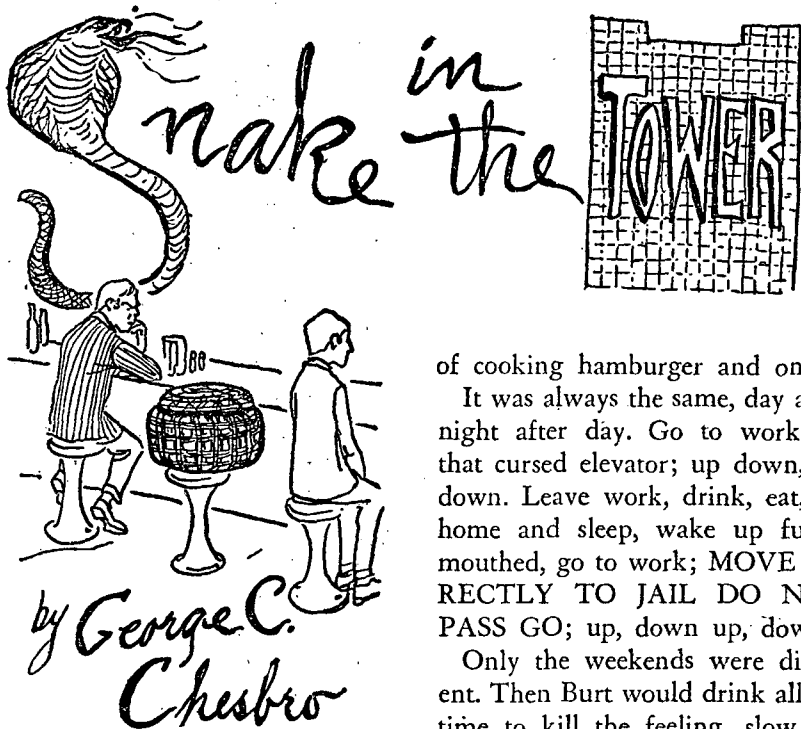
Desperate, I tore the nylon from Charlie's face. Prying open his mouth, I was panic-stricken to find he had swallowed part of the gag; it was lodged in his windpipe. I jerked it out and began frantically slapping his face and massaging his heart. Then I felt for his pulse. There was none. Maybe I'm too excited to feel it, I told myself. After trying both wrists again and again, I gave up. *Charlie was dead.* The thought set my senses whirling. He was dead and I had murdered him!

Then another stunning blow hit my reeling brain: His wife knew that he was meeting *me* here! I was as good as nailed.

Suddenly, the phone on the desk rang jarringly, and I cowered against the wall, quailing in terror at its loud persistent ringing. Charlie's wife, I knew it! I started running, and the phone was still ringing, ringing . . .



A snake in the hand is worth two . . . Sorry, birds, but it does break the monotony.



THE GLASS DOOR opened hard and Burt Abele shivered as he passed into the steamy heat which kept at bay the winter cold on 8th Avenue. The sudden warmth flushed his face and stirred the alcohol in his stomach. There was a heavy odor

of cooking hamburger and onion.

It was always the same, day after night after day. Go to work on that cursed elevator; up down, up down. Leave work, drink, eat, go home and sleep, wake up furry-mouthed, go to work; **MOVE DIRECTLY TO JAIL DO NOT PASS GO;** up, down up, down.

Only the weekends were different. Then Burt would drink all the time to kill the feeling, slow the hours leading relentlessly forward to Monday when the mechanical jaws of the elevator would fold him back into his own personal hell.

At thirty-one, he was too young to be caught in this vise, Burt believed. Always there was the taste of stale beer in his mouth. Life

must be *more*. But what to do? Of course he could always "pull a muscle" and go on welfare or live off workmen's compensation but then there'd be nothing else to do anyway and he'd only drink more; and more. Burt was not stupid; he was better off working.

"Two with onions," Burt muttered thickly, raising his fingers. "Black coffee and a side of potatoes."

That'd fix him up. Go to sleep on a full stomach so he could go up-down in the morning and not be sick.

Abele folded his napkin into intricate patterns and looked about him at the other patrons. What did they do? Were they, too, dying inside? Of course they'd never tell, even if they were; people don't talk about such things.

The White Tower was fairly crowded and there was but one man, a boy really, behind the counter that Burt judged to be no older than eighteen or nineteen. Freckled, with flaming red hair, the boy moved easily and casually from customer to grill and then back to customer, obviously in no hurry.

Maybe he should get a job like that, Burt considered; no up or down, just back and forth. But where was the difference? The boy's pale face and dull, clouded eyes told him there was none; it

was all deadly monotony, eating bit by bit, day by day, into the sharp edges of a man's soul. He wished he had the guts right now to get up and walk out to the street. He could hitch a ride, flag a bus, ride a train, keep going for a long, long time, but somehow Burt knew it would make no difference. Life's a disease of lengthy duration but a disease nonetheless; first the mind goes, then the body.

A distraught mother on his right struggled to cope with her two excited children. A large collection of badges, balloons and peanut shells indicated there had been a visit to the circus holding forth in Madison Square Garden, a few blocks away. Burt stared, remembering times long past when he too had been pushed to the heights of ecstasy by leaping men and painted clowns and he too, like these children, had spun and spun on his stool and demanded more candy. Now it was just up down drink sleep up . . .

How does a person change his life?

He was a prisoner of the city, the great mirror that reflected and magnified his own boredom and frustration. But what does one do? The day of the covered wagons is past and neon light blasts into both oceans.

Next to Burt, also on his right,

was a small, bookish man with a crumpled brown suit and glasses with very thick lenses. The man had just finished a large piece of pie and was now rounding up all the flakes and crumbs, pressing them into the tines of his fork and transferring them to his mouth.

The coffee came, hot on his tongue, acid in his stomach. Where were the hamburgers? The red-haired boy was very slow; back and forth, back and forth.

The young couple on Burt's left got up and left amidst a spatter of giggles. Their fingers groped and intertwined. How long had it been since he had had a woman? A *nice* woman? Updown, backforth.

Farther down, near the door, Burt spotted a young woman, good-looking but heavily made up, with garish black net stockings showing beneath the hem of her very long, wool coat. Probably a go-go girl from one of the bars nearby. Burt smiled to himself. Here was a girl with an even worse problem; up and down, back and forth, around and around with a bunch of luses watching her to boot, all wanting the same thing as if she were some kind of object or piece of merchandise. At least he didn't have anybody watching him. He was left alone to do his dying each day.

The hamburgers came and they tasted good. Maybe the red-haired

kid had a little book explaining in detail just how to prepare each item of food. Except the coffee; that was still acid.

A man entered, carrying a large, closed basket under his arm. Burt stared hard. Another one from the circus, he decided; this one, a performer of some kind. The man sat two seats away from Burt, placing the basket on the empty stool between them. The man was dark-skinned, with very thin, compressed lips, complemented by a thin, angular nose. There was strength in the man's face. He wore a well-fitted, neatly pressed suit and yet he looked slightly uncomfortable, as if he were used to another form of dress. His hands were folded in front of him as he waited patiently for the red-haired boy to take notice of him.

Burt's gaze swept down past the wooden basket and then shot back again. His eyes stayed riveted on the dark cane and the white letters on the crimson label. He felt a little chill along his spine.

"Hey," Burt said, waving his fingers at the dark-skinned man, "you really got a snake in there?"

The snake-man turned slowly and smiled. In a voice very soft and deep, like the lead in a movie, he said, "Yes, but it can't hurt you."

"A king cobra?"

The snake-man smiled again.

"The basket is secured very tightly," he said, lightly shaking the container. "You see? You have nothing to fear."

"I wasn't afraid," Burt said, somewhat surprised to find it was the truth. "It's just that it gives a person a pretty weird feeling sitting next to something like that."

The man nodded, and Burt pushed away the remains of his hamburgers and lit a cigarette to smoke while drinking the rest of his coffee. The go-go girl brushed past him, apparently on her way to make a call in one of the booths at the rear near the mother and her children. Burt wondered how the girl would react if she knew she had just passed within a few inches of a cobra—of death. People never considered things like that; just up and down, back and forth, around and around, hurrying toward nothing.

Funny, Burt realized, how that snake made him feel more alive. He dragged heavily on his cigarette and thought about that; weird. The coffee was cold and normally he would have left by now, but this sensation was too new, too heady, to walk away from so quickly. He was completely sober and had not felt so *aware* in days, weeks . . . months. There was no longer any thought of up and down. His cigarette tasted sharp and exhilarating;

the lights were lighter and he heard things more clearly. There was a snake a few inches away from his thigh and that snake could end all updown, backforth, forever. Funny how he should need the presence of death to make him feel more alive.

"How come that thing isn't locked up someplace?" Burt asked, immediately feeling foolish. He was *glad* the man had brought the snake.

The snake-man turned and smiled as before. Everything about this man was graceful, hinting at speed and power; perhaps like his snakes. "I am with the circus," he said. "Our contract stipulates that poisonous snakes must be with a handler at all time. There is no danger, I can assure you."

"Oh, I don't mind," Burt said quickly. "I was just curious."

What happened next blended instantly with time and space, crippling the normal process of careful reasoning, throwing each person back on the ancient reserves of instinct. As sometimes happens with the best of mothers, the woman in the back had reached the end of her patience. There was a sharp crack of flesh against flesh as the young boy screamed and leaped back, crashing into Burt, who was unable to avoid brushing the wooden basket which fell to the floor

with a startling, fearsome crash.

Burt shot back hard off his stool, backing into the go-go girl who had finished her call and was returning to her seat. She was yelling something in his ear but Burt remained standing, his arms held out to his sides, blocking her passage, his eyes riveted to the spot on the floor where the basket had landed.

"Wait!" Burt commanded, tensing the muscles in his arms.

The snake-man had risen. "It is nothing," he said, reaching down for the basket.

"Wait!" Burt said again, this time extending one arm out toward the snake-man and consequently saving his life.

From where he was standing, the snake-man might never have seen the flat, green-brown head, the flicking tongue or the cold, lidless eyes that slowly emerged from the hole in the basket which had smashed on impact with the floor. Slowly—inch by inch, foot by foot—the king cobra slid out into the middle of the tile floor. People scattered in all directions; those in the front crushed through the single glass door, while those behind Burt squeezed back, in and around the phone booths.

"What the—" came from the red-haired back-and-forth boy from behind the counter. His face was even paler than before but there was more teen-age incredulity in his

voice than fear. Nothing like this had ever happened in a White Tower before.

"Why that's a king cobra!" the bookish man was saying, dropping his fork and sending the light crumbs and flakes floating to the floor. "A cobra!"

The go-go girl was clutching at Burt's coat and shouting a hysterical torrent of obscenities. He felt himself being pushed forward and braced hard on his front foot, all the time keeping his arms extended wide, never taking his eyes from the thick, eight-foot ribbon of death a few feet away.

"Please be quiet," the snake-man said. "It's very important that all of you be quiet."

The snake-man had frozen when he had seen the snake emerge from the basket, only inches from his outstretched hand. Now he slowly straightened and backed against the counter, shallow breathing the only sign of his agitation; his face was expressionless. One man near the front who had stood rooted to the spot, paralyzed by fear, now uttered a cry and bolted for the door.

"Get help," the snake-man said, raising an arm in the man's direction but not taking his eyes from the snake. "Call the police and tell them what happened. They'll know who to call."

Burt could hear the mother's sob-



bing in the rear, sharp and crackling in the heavy air. The snake swayed and began to rise, the back of its head and neck swelling like a thick rubber bag.

"Please stop that," the snake-man said, his voice a soft but urgent demand. "And do not move, any of you. Frieda is extremely dangerous and will attack if you make her

nervous. Please stay very still."

The snake-man started slowly making his way toward the cobra, removing his jacket as he did so and holding it out in front of him, waving it slowly back and forth, circling around, never taking his eyes from those of the snake.

"You can put your arms down now, buster," the go-go girl said,

her voice a whisper. "I'm sure as hell not going anywhere near that monster."

Burt lowered his arms and breathed easier. At least the snake-man looked like he knew what he was doing as he continued to circle the reptile, never varying his easy, rhythmic motion. The cobra was still raised up but there was no longer any swelling at the back of the head. The snake seemed mesmerized by the man's actions. Now, if the snake-man could only keep it that way until some kind of help arrived. Why was it taking so long for someone to get here? Was it possible the man, once free of danger, had simply gone home, dismissing the matter as someone else's bad luck? Impossible! But the thought kept coming back and Burt felt cold.

"How—how dangerous is it?" the mother asked in a quivering voice.

"Very," the bookish man said. "The venom of a cobra acts directly upon the nervous system. Death comes in seconds. There's almost nothing one can do..."

"Can't you *do something*?" the go-go girl said to the red-haired boy, who had stopped going back and forth and was half-crouched behind the counter. "We're trapped here, and that thing could *kill* us."

The red-haired boy ducked down

behind the counter and resurfaced with a heavy, bone-handled meat cleaver in his hand. The voice of the snake-man came at them again, soft but very strained.

"I asked you not to *move*."

"What's the matter with you!" the go-go girl screamed. "Is that thing more important to you than our lives? Kill it!"

The spell over the snake had been broken. The movement and the sharp static of voices had distracted the reptile from the carefully planned, rhythmic movements of the snake-man. The flat head soared high as the hood swelled and there was a sharp hiss.

"That's how they strike!" the bookish man said, his voice muffled by the hand over his mouth.

Burt stared wide-eyed and remembered something he had read about cobras lunging forward, rather than striking from a coiled position like a rattlesnake. That made them a bit slower, which was an advantage, however slight.

The snake hissed again just before the head sailed through the air toward the snake-man, who stepped nimbly aside. The snake reared back again, but now the snake-man was weaving slowly and the reptile began rocking back and forth as the fangs retracted and the hood relaxed. The snake-man's shirt and slacks were spotted with cobra venom as

the mother stifled a scream deep in her throat and the go-go girl shrieked nervously. It seemed to Burt that they were in a glass sphere whirling through space a thousand miles an hour, yet everything was very, very *real*.

"It is most important that you follow my instructions," the snake-man said, his voice betraying no more than a slight annoyance at the mistake that had almost cost him his life. "Cobras have been known to stalk and attack. If Frieda decides to come toward you I know no way of stopping her. As far as killing her is concerned, it is true that Frieda is a valuable animal. However, that is not the question here. The slightest scratch from her fangs means death. If she is to be killed before she bites her attacker, the head must be sliced off. Who is willing to come that close? No one? In that case, please remain still."

This is insane, Burt felt. A king cobra-death crawled only a few feet from them, ready to strike; and a few feet further stood at least a hundred people, their noses pressed to the protective barrier of glass, watching the drama within. He and the snake-man and the bookish man and the mother and the children and the go-go girl might have been no more than a Christmas display on Fifth Avenue. But they

were *not*; they were *people* and they were in very real danger. Outside, children were jumping up and down, back and forth, pushing around and around trying to get a better look. *Insane!* This was New York City and not some jungle in India...

What was it he had read about ten thousand Indians dying each year from snakebite? That had never meant much to him; a statistic buried in the newspaper amidst a hundred other statistics whirled and lighted and coughed by some chromed computer somewhere. *Now* it meant something. *Now*... Burt could see a small, frail, brown-skinned man clad, perhaps, only in a loin cloth, hurrying along some jungle path or traversing the outskirts of a city, hurrying to get home where his wife and children would be waiting with love and something cool to drink. There is a sudden, stabbing pain in the soft calf of his leg and the man looks down, terror already clawing at his stomach, to see a cobra glide away through the tall grass. The man sits alone in the middle of the path and waits for death that he knows will be soon and is inevitable; already he is having trouble drawing breath and he wishes his life had not had to end so soon but it has...

There they are with their noses pressed against the glass and chil-

dren jumping . . . Those idiots!

The snake-man was circling closer and closer. Why hadn't anyone come? The presence of death; everything is magnified, amplified, salted, sautéed in the life juices of the man who wants desperately to see once again the warmth of the sun on his face and knows he may not. Burt wanted to go home that night and smoke the cigarettes, curse the traffic lights . . .

"Jamiel!" The mother's scream pierced through the glass windows, and the children stopped jumping as a hundred pairs of eyes stared in terror and there were answering screams. Too late Burt caught a glimpse of the boy rushing past. The snake's head jerked back; venom dripped from the exposed fangs and the sound of hissing filled the Tower.

What Burt did next was instinctive and, in the years ahead, years filled with a new sense of life and awareness, he would look back upon that one instant in time and reflect and be proud that he had never really stopped to think about what he had done. He had acted—

and in that acceptance of death he had found the key to life.

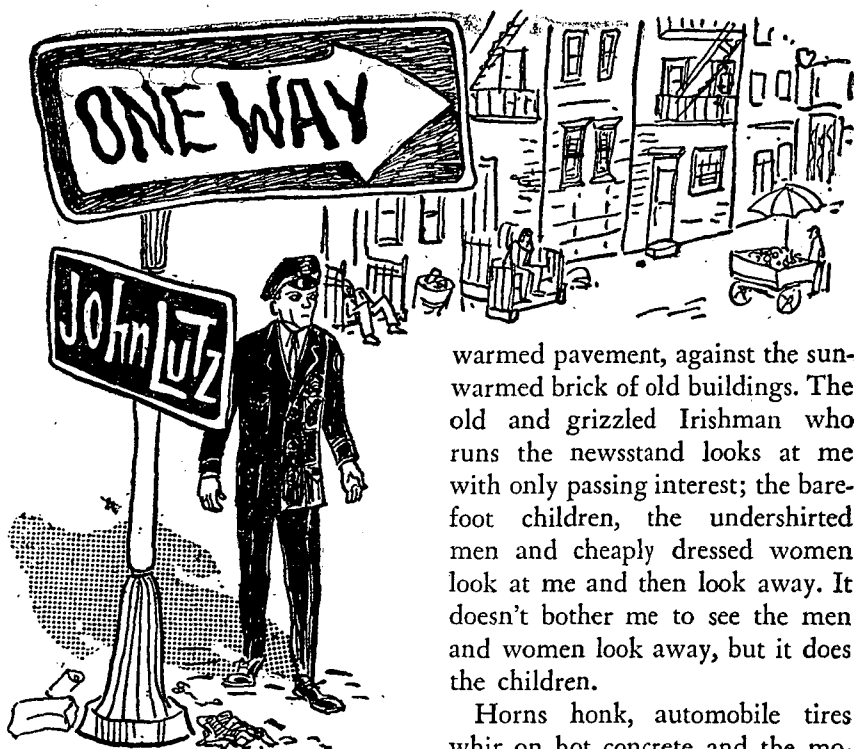
Burt left his feet and flew through the air, his arm extended full length, his hand reaching for the head of the snake that was already arcing through the air toward the fear-paralyzed body of the boy. There was but an instant of pain and a swelling, numbing sensation in his hand as the snake's fangs sliced through the flesh of his hand, and Burt Abele fell unconscious on the cold tile of the Tower, the snake pinned beneath him.

It was instinct, too, and the reserves of courage that propelled the red-haired boy through the air, over the counter, the meat-cleaver held high over his head.

Instantly, the snake-man clutched the gushing stump of Burt's wrist in a vise-like grip and pushed the thrashing, headless carcass of the cobra aside. Then, to be heard above the screaming, milling, up-down throng of people running back and forth, around and around on the stained concrete of the sidewalk outside, he yelled, "He will live! He will *live!*"



Or, as Henry Fielding burlesqued, Huncamunca: O Tom Thumb! Tom Thumb! wherefore art thou Tom Thumb!



How did it come to pass? Here I walk alone, on this mad street, among these mad people. They see the bright blue of my uniform, the silver glitter that is my badge, and not a few of them instinctively shrink backward on the sun-

warmed pavement, against the sunwarmed brick of old buildings. The old and grizzled Irishman who runs the newsstand looks at me with only passing interest; the barefoot children, the undershirted men and cheaply dressed women look at me and then look away. It doesn't bother me to see the men and women look away, but it does the children.

Horns honk, automobile tires whirl on hot concrete and the motorists look at me unconsciously for assurance, glad to see a policeman as they are driving down such a street. The sweating deliverymen in open vans that might be carrying money, they all look at me for assurance, and I look back and smile slightly, with my whole face.

A dark, shirtless child runs down the wide sidewalk, in a line parallel to my line of walk. The broken red wagon he's pulling hits a raised seam in the cement, rattling crazily and bouncing as he runs faster to get past me quickly. I place my hand on his shoulder.

"Have you seen Tony Randello?" I ask.

He stares up at me in the sudden silence of the still wagon, his eyes wide, his thin, bony shoulder squirming uneasily beneath my hand. "I don't know no Tony Randello, sir. Honest."

"Honest," I repeat after him. He looks at the ground. "I believe you, son," I say, taking my hand from his shoulder. He runs down the street and turns into an alley, the unrhythmic jangle of the wagon echoing away.

These people don't trust me, I know. How could they? It's my first day here, and it takes time, so much time, to get to know these people. There is a man about thirty years old sitting on the stoop of one of the towering, darkened tenement buildings that reach like rows of old fingers into the sky. He is wearing a brightly colored, flowered sport shirt, unbuttoned halfway down to reveal the hair on his chest. He looks at me with feigned unconcern as I start to approach him.

"Where can I find Tony Randello?" I ask.

"Wherever he's at," the man answers, his blue eyes flat.

I stare into those eyes a long time, and he looks away and reaches inside his shirt and scratches his chest where I know it doesn't itch.

"This Tony whatever-his-name-is," he says, "what's he gone and done?"

"Things he'll be sorry for," I say, and I feel an insect-like trickle of sweat inside my own blue uniform shirt and suppress the urge to run my hand over it.

The man smiles and shrugs his shoulders. "Well, it don't concern me, officer, 'cause I never even heard of Tony somethin'-or-other, not on this street, anyways."

"How long have you lived here?" I ask.

"All my life," he answers. "Everybody lives here all his life."

I turn and walk away.

Half a block farther down I see a husky, squinting man standing next to one of those small outside fruit stands that you don't often see anymore. He's wearing a faded blue shirt, dirty, damp, with the sleeves rolled up over strong, tanned arms. His face, too, is damp with beads of perspiration, and I know that he's been standing there in the sun a long time.

I stop in front of him.

"Apples are good today," he says, his dark eyes smiling.

"Listen," I say, "do you know where I can find Tony Randello?"

"Who's he?"

"A kid about fourteen. Slim, dark hair, nice looking, dresses kind of flashy whenever he can. He's building up quite a record with the law."

The man shakes his head. "That sounds like a lot of 'em. There's maybe hundreds like that on this street, but I don't recall the name Randello." He shakes his head harder. "No, I don't think there's no Randello around here." He makes a jerking motion with his thumb toward an old man sitting on a stoop farther down the street. "Ol' Bert, there, maybe he can help you, if he's sober. He knows everybody."

"Thanks," I say, walking away.

"You wanna taste a nice apple?" he calls after me, but I don't bother to look back.

"You're Bert," I say to the old man.

"Tell me something new," he answers. He is a very small old man, with faded eyes and a thin, withered mouth, like one might see on a shrunken head.

"I want to find Tony Randello," I tell him.

"You fellas always want to find somebody," he says. "Makes me feel

just about as good as a taxpayer."

"Just answer the question," I say, and there's something in the way I say it that makes him become serious.

"There ain't any Randellos on this street," he says.

"This is a kid, about fourteen, slim, dark."

The old man nods his head toward the ever-present children on the street. "Lots of 'em are fourteen and slim and dark."

I begin to walk away.

"Wait," he says, and he runs a skeletal hand over hair that is thin wisps of dirty gray. "There used to be some Randellos on this street, in the next block, I think. They had a kid name of Tony that was always in trouble with the law, but that's been . . . twenty years ago. Big Tony, the old man, drunk himself to the grave an' took the old lady with him." He squints his faded eyes and looks up and about at the decaying tenements. "But that ain't rare around here."

"You don't remember what happened to the rest of the family, do you?"

"I ain't even sure their name was Randello," he says. He lies back against the angled steps and closes his eyes to the sun. I see the outlines of a bottle in his pocket.

I walk on. Heat rises in waves, like gasoline vapor, from the con-

crete before me. It dizzies me and I stop for a moment, looking up and breathing deeply. The towering tenement buildings seem to sway against the blue hardness of the sky. I grip my forehead and look down. One building is as good as another for a place to start. They are all alike, inside and outside.

There is no door to the entrance of the building I choose, and I stand on the ancient, broken tile inside the doorway and listen to the noises of the street. Beneath the row of useless doorbell buttons sits a broken baby stroller, and on the walls are the usual four letter words that have been ineffectually scratched out by some of the tenants. I climb the creaking stairs and begin to hear the muffled voices, the too-loud radio, the baby crying. The odor of a dozen foods clings greasily to the walls. There is something in the air that makes my eyes water.

I knock on the first door, and a woman's voice tells me from inside to go away. Somewhere above me in the building a dog barks. I move on to the next door and knock loudly. It opens.

The woman is middle-aged, stout and dark-eyed, with black hair curled too tightly by a cheap permanent. Behind her is the threadbare furniture, the cracked walls.

"I'm looking for Tony Rand-

ello," I say to her. "A young kid."

She smiles and shakes her head. "Not Randello," she says. "This is Magello."

I look past her. "May I come in?"

She hesitates, but because of my uniform she steps aside and lets me enter.

I walk across the bare floor and look into the tiny kitchen.

"I told you there is no Randello," the woman says in a worried voice. "Here there is only Magello. My husband is William Magello."

Nodding to her, I walk to a closed door and open it into a bedroom. A small girl of about ten is lying on the bed holding up a doll. She looks at me but I ignore her and close the door again. There is one more closed door. "Tony!" I call loudly.

"No Tony," the woman says behind me. "There is no Tony!"

"What the hell's goin' on?" a man's muffled voice asks from behind the door. The door opens and the man stands there, wearing a robe and old slippers. His graying hair is mussed. "What is it, officer?" he asks, seeing the uniform. "I was sleeping, I work nights." He makes a gesture toward the bedroom with his hand.

"I'm looking for someone," I say, brushing past him.

The bedroom is empty, I rip the covers and mattress off the bed. I

throw open the closet door. There is no one.

I return to the livingroom and grip the man by the front of his robe, hear the material rip. "Where is he?" I ask, and I shake the man. I scream it this time, *"I know he lives here! I know!"*

Behind me the woman screams shrilly. Doors slam, and the dog begins to bark again.

I am crying, but it is someone else crying.

Then I hear it, and I release the man. It grows louder, the unmistakable urgent despair of police sirens.

The sirens become deafening, and then they fade to a loud growl. I walk into the hall, down the creaking stairs and outside to meet them.

Flashing red lights battle the sun. The officers look at me strangely and their eyes narrow. Their pistols drawn, they advance on me and hold me by each arm. One of them holsters his pistol, and cold handcuffs are clamped on my wrists. A silent crowd has gathered to watch the unusual spectacle, policemen

holding, handcuffing a policeman.

Mr. Magello, in his torn robe, is caressing the air with his right hand and talking to a policeman while Mrs. Magello stares curiously at me from beneath her too-tight cheap permanent with something like pity. In a few minutes a green car stops at the curb and Dr. Moritz gets out. His face is unlined, as it always is.

Dr. Moritz, also, talks to the other-policeman as the two officers who are holding me lead me to the wagon. ". . . His name's Tony Randello . . . wouldn't harm anyone . . ." I hear him saying, ". . . escaped before . . . for the criminally insane . . ."

They open the patrol wagon doors wide, and the dim, caged interior appears cool and sheltering after the heat and the steady gaze of the crowd. I can still hear Dr. Moritz as I'm prodded inside. ". . . Grew up on this street . . . steals a policeman's uniform and just walks around down here, searching . . ."

"Searching . . ." I repeat silently to myself.

The doors slam shut.

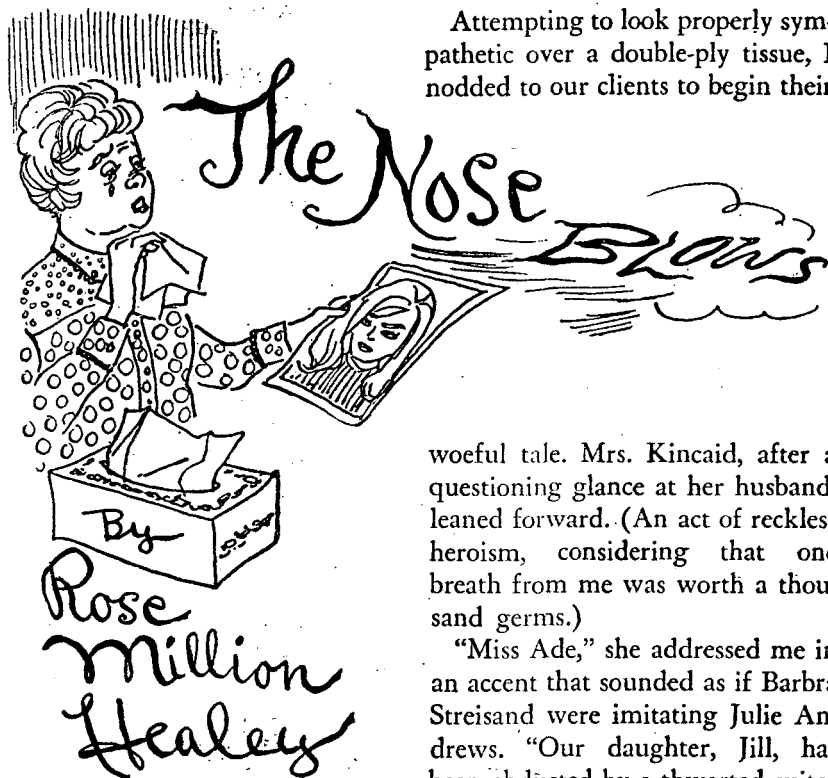


It has been insinuated, too, that if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter, the whole world would have been changed.



—I counted them—"Gesundheit."

Attempting to look properly sympathetic over a double-ply tissue, I nodded to our clients to begin their



woeful tale. Mrs. Kincaid, after a questioning glance at her husband, leaned forward. (An act of reckless heroism, considering that one breath from me was worth a thousand germs.)

"Miss Ade," she addressed me in an accent that sounded as if Barbra Streisand were imitating Julie Andrews. "Our daughter, Jill, has been abducted by a thwarted suitor one week before her wedding to another."

WINTERTIME, and the living is sneezy. Automatically, my fellow detective, Tim Tierney, tendered me the morning's twenty-seventh

As the woman watched what was visible of my face to see if I'd been suitably impressed, her husband snorted.

"Nonsense," Mr. Kincaid contradicted. "She was kidnapped."

Mrs. Kincaid's determinedly genteel voice was in direct contrast to the ferocious glare she turned on her husband. "Then, my deah, why was there no ransom note?"

"Because they're smart. They know they can soak me for plenty and the longer they hold off their demands, the bigger they can make 'em," Mr. Kincaid growled.

"You," Mrs. Kincaid said loftily, "think money solves everything."

"It's answered a lot of *your* problems," her husband pointed out.

This bickering wasn't getting us anywhere. Clearing my cold-clogged gullet, I intervened. "When exactly did you see your daughter last?"

"Friday night," Mr. and Mrs. K. replied in unison. See, they could agree on something.

"I went into her bedroom," the lady said, "to tell her good night after a dinner party at our home, and she was gone. Gone!"

"You've notified the police, of course?"

The customers exchanged uneasy looks.

Finally, the man blustered, "We didn't want to be hasty. She might have had bridal jitters and gone to a hotel for a night or two. Or she could have been visiting a friend and forgotten to tell us."

"Your daughter has been missing since Friday night, and you waited until Monday morning to do anything about it?" I inquired. Tim accuses me often of treating the parents as if *they* were the delinquents. I say I call them as I see them.

Mrs. Kincaid squirmed uncomfortably in her chair. "We didn't want any—unfortunate publicity. We're *rahther* prominent in our little community—"

"So I had my secretary do some discreet research," Mr. Kincaid interrupted, "and she came up with your agency. Seems you've had a lot of experience with missing persons."

"Most of our cases deal with runaways," Tim put in. "Kids who left home, because they wanted to."

The barrage of protests leveled by the Kincaids at my poor sidekick would have been enough to fell an ordinary man. Jill Katherine Kincaid, they claimed, was "supremely happy" in her "gracious home" where she had "every advantage that money and loving parents could provide." So on and so forth, fancy broad A and businessman's rasp, both presented the usual *mea non culpa* of abandoned progenitors. Tim and I had heard it hundreds of times before.

Tim took the harangue stoically.

I sneezed and blew my nose.

Later, after I'd dragged forth a few more facts about their child from the Kincaids, they swept out. Tim and I silently studied a picture of the girl: nineteen, blonde, with that finishing school prettiness that made her a carbon copy of thousands of other overprivileged children, except there was an expression in the wide-set eyes. Sadness?

Half seriously, Tim suggested, "Why not just leave her alone?"

"Because we don't like the tree," I wheezed, "doesn't mean we have to let the fruit rot."

"What makes you think she's rotting?" Tim asked. "It's my opinion that wherever she is, she's better off than with them."

An assignment, however, is an assignment. Besides, Jill Kincaid might possibly have met with foul play, and the Ade Agency Aims to Aid. (Nice? I thought of the slogan myself.) So, while Tim contacts his contacts at the Missing Persons Bureau, I cold-foot it over to 231 Park Avenue. There, one Anthony Gardner is bucking for a junior partnership in a respected, multi-named lawyers' firm. Tony Gardner is Jill's *quondam* fiance.

If I'd had any idea that the elusive lady had bolted to escape an unpalatable future, meeting her would-be bridegroom certainly

changed my mind. Oh, to be twenty years younger; all right, twenty-five. Anyhow, he was slim, tall and fair. If I'd married Merv Butts during World War II, I might have a son like Tony Gardner now.

Well, back to business. Tony talked to me in his little cubbyhole of an office where the lack of activity for a sub-junior partner was proclaimed by a book of crossword puzzles and two full ashtrays on his otherwise empty desk. At first, young Gardner was extremely cordial and displayed the kind of boyish charm that plump, old maid gumshoes with semi-influenza find hard to resist. However, when I mentioned the reason for my visit, his jaw tightened, and his expression became withdrawn.

"I don't care to discuss her," he said, at the sound of Jill Kincaid's name.

Funny, but her parents had been evasive when I'd asked why Jill's betrothed wasn't with them to report her disappearance. They'd said he was terribly busy clearing away work before leaving on his honeymoon. Quite reluctantly they had supplied me with his name and business address. When I confronted the young man with this information, he emitted a short, mirthless laugh.

"Busy?" With a gesture he indicated his sparsely populated *escri-*

toire. "Mr. and Mrs. Kincaid didn't want you to see me because—"

I thought he'd paused for dramatic emphasis, but as the silence became prolonged, I realized he'd clammed up on me again.

"Why?" I prodded. "Why didn't the Kincaids want me to question you?"

"Because I'd tell you the truth."

"Then *tell* me," I insisted.

Sighing, the young man rose and walked to the one small window in his closet-like office. His back to me, he stared out at the now swirling snow.

Watching his shoulders twitch slightly, I said in as motherly a voice as my unmarried state could manage, "You'd better tell me all about it, son. You'll feel better if you do."

"Saying aloud that Jill ran away because she didn't want to marry me, that she ran away to avoid facing me and telling me, *that* will make me feel better?"

"What makes you think she didn't want to marry you?" I asked. Had the Kincaids neglected to inform me that their daughter wasn't right in the head? "Don't you realize she may not have left of her own volition? Her parents think she's been kidnapped or abducted."

"From a third-story bedroom in a house filled with servants and surrounded by dogs and burglar

alarms?" Tony Gardner turned to face me. His eyes looked suspiciously red-rimmed, but otherwise he was a fine specimen of American manhood.

"She acted very strangely Friday night," he said, obviously deciding to cooperate. Seated at his desk across from me, Tony recalled the events of his last evening with his love.

It seems that was the occasion of Jill's first meeting with her in-laws-to-be. Mr. and Mrs. Gardner were from Cleveland, Shaker Heights to be exact, and rarely came east. They had arrived in New York that morning in order to be on hand for the many festivities the Kincaids and Jill's friends had planned for the week before the wedding. That evening an intimate family dinner had been arranged. The Gardners and son were to be entertained by Mr. and Mrs. Kincaid and daughter in their modest eighteen room Long Island shack.

"At first," Tony related, "Jill was jittery, but I considered that understandable under the circumstances. I was nervous as hell myself. Oh," he read the query in my eyes, "not because I was worried about the impression Jill would make. But, well, an Oriental definition of 'trouble' is two families under one roof, and we had a full house of in-laws."

Drawing a deep breath, the boy continued, "Then little by little, as the evening wore on, I began to notice that Jill was becoming glum, almost morose. Someone would speak to her, and she wouldn't answer. She seemed to be brooding about something. I got her alone once in a corner of the room and asked her what the trouble was. She looked up at me with the saddest eyes I've ever seen. I started to plead with her to tell me what was the matter—"

"Yes?" I leaned forward. Relevant or not, I love a good story.

Tony Gardner shook his head. "My mother called to us not to be so exclusive, and my father said we'd have more time to be alone than we wanted, after the wedding. So I didn't find out."

"And that's what you base your belief on that she didn't want to marry you, a sad look?" I asked.

"No, Miss Ade," the young man said. "During dinner, Jill suddenly jumped up from the table. Without excusing herself, she ran from the room. When she didn't return for some time, her mother sent me after her. She was in the main hall talking on the telephone. I heard her say, 'Billy. Billy, you're the only one who can help me. Please—' Then she saw me and hung up. As you can imagine, the rest of the evening wasn't especially pleasant for

me. I left as soon as I could persuade my parents to go."

"That's all?" I always like to know if there's a clinch at the end.

There was. "All," Tony Gardner reported, "unless it matters that, at the door, Jill threw herself into my arms and kissed me as if there were no tomorrow. I know now it was her way of saying there wasn't."

"I don't believe it, Tony," I said firmly, forgetting formality. Rising to my feet, I assured the young man, "That girl loves you. And I'm going to find her and bring her back to you."

"Miss Ade, how can you be so sure?"

I tapped my nasal organ. "I have a *nose* for these things."

The young man looked almost convinced. Then, unfortunately, I sneezed.

I returned to the office for a change from rubbers to snow boots. Tim was there with a nice little nothing for his pains with the authorities. The last three days had not produced a bumper crop of nineteen-year-old blondes in the morgues, precincts or hospitals.

"I didn't think you'd find her, Tim," I confided. "My nose tells me—"

"Are you still on speaking terms with that beak of yours after what it's been doing to you lately?" Tim

has never had too much confidence in my bloodhound propensities. At least, he *says* he hasn't.

I ignored my partner's barb. "I'm pretty sure our chick has flown the coop on her own. Something tells me—"

"How can you jump to such a conclusion?" Tim howled in exasperation. "You haven't even checked the people she knows, her house, her room—"

"I'm taking care of that right now," I said, pulling on my boots. "I'm off to the wilds of Long Island."

"You are not. You're one step away from pneumonia. If you think I'll let you trek through the snow—"

"But it's my job, Tim," I protested.

"Wrong," Tim informed me. "It's mine. You go home and take an aspirin. Take two."

I blinked meekly at my associate. Sometimes belonging to the weaker sex is very convenient.

Tony Gardner's mother and father were staying at a fashionable East Side hotel, and I teeth-chattingly demanded their room number from a disdainful clerk.

"Twenty-seven-thirty-eight," was the haughty reply.

I puddled my way to one of the dozen elevators. Naturally, I hadn't taken Dr. Timothy Tierney's

advice. His going to the Kincaid residence simply freed me for sleuthing closer at hand. A rather handsome, well-corseted lady answered my knock.

"Oh," she oh-ed. "I thought you were room service."

I shook my head, spraying the corridor with melting snow, and introduced myself.

Looking at my credentials, the lady called over her shoulder: "Ahlfred."

A grunt came from within.

"Ahlfred, deah, do come. It's a detective. A—woman."

She was a daisy, this one, but I had only myself to blame. I should have telephoned and asked for an interview. However, catching folks off guard is frequently efficacious. Not that I suspected the Gardners of anything, but they had been with Jill Kincaid the evening she vanished. Maybe they'd had her investigated. (Yes, some people do that to their prospective in-laws. Take it from me, I *know*.) Maybe they discovered something unsavory in her past and had hinted as much to the girl.

After Mrs. Gardner reluctantly indicated that I might perch my wet self on a chair in a draft, I advanced my theory. Certainly not! The lady and gentleman were shocked. She, that anyone could think she'd have dealings with in-

vestigators; he, at the idea of spending good money on shenanigans like that.

"Well," I tried again, "You didn't recognize Jill unpleasantly from somewhere?"

"Never saw her before," Mr. Gardner grumbled.

"Did you like her?" I asked.

"Nice enough little thing, I guess," the man answered. "Quiet and nervous, though."

Mrs. Gardner's reserve broke. "If you *ahsk* me, she had no social graces. None. I'm sure I'm very sorry for whatever has happened to her. But when you consider that our Anthony could have his pick of anyone in Shaker Heights—well, perhaps he's well out of it."

I made it home to catch Tim's telephone call on what was probably its last ring.

"Did I wake you up?" he asked almost gently.

"I was awake," I answered truthfully, trying not to pant.

"Good." So much for solicitude. "News," Tim chortled. "I'm in a pay booth in Mineola, and it's cold as Eliza's feet, so I won't talk long—"

"What's the news?" I broke in. Tim can talk longer about why he can't talk long than Castro.

"I checked the house and grounds. It sure would have been a job for anyone to steal the girl

away against her will. Her room wasn't roughed up any, either. A few of her clothes and a small suitcase were missing, according to her mother after I made her check. While she was going through some drawers, I made a little discovery."

"How little?"

"Under one of the scented paper liners," Tim said, "there was a picture of a guy, twenty-one, twenty-two. It was signed 'Billy.'"

"Tim! You've got a picture of the mysterious Billy?" I gasped.

"It wasn't as easy as that. The Kincaids acted like I'd dug up a dead skunk. They said the kid wasn't anybody, just some singer Jill had admired when she was in school. I know they were holding out on me. Why do people do that? It's like lying to a psychiatrist. Anyway, when I kept at them, Mr. Kincaid grabbed the picture and tore it up."

"You haven't got the picture," I lamented.

"When I was being shown out, I suddenly remembered that I'd left my gloves in Jill's room. I went back—"

"And emptied the contents of the wastebasket into your pockets," I finished. "Tim, I'm proud of you."

"Shucks, 'tweren't nothing any other industrious, courageous shamus couldn't have done."

When Tim arrived at my apart-

ment that afternoon, I had news for him. By pulling the useful but expensive string I have at the telephone company, I'd obtained a list of calls made from the Kincaid house on Friday night. Three: one to the weather bureau, another to one of Mrs. Kincaid's committee members and, the final one, at eight-twenty-three in the evening, to San Francisco, California. The number belonged to an establishment called The Blood Shed.

Gluing the glossy of Billy back together revealed the hairiest bit of masculinity this side of King Kong. Zulu hairdo, sideburns, mustache, beard, just about his only bald spots were his eyeballs. In one furry mitt he clutched a guitar. The inscription read:

To the only square
who's on the square.
Like Love,
Billy

We didn't want to call The Blood Shed and inquire about Billy Boy for fear of alerting him that his trail was being sniffed, so Tim volunteered to make the rounds of his show business acquaintances for information, and I accepted gratefully. When he'd gone, I wrapped my aching carcass in two nightgowns, a robe and a pair of woolen socks, finally took those aspirin and went immediately to bed. I was going to need my rest. Something

told me I'd be traveling west the next day. My nose? No, all it told me was to snatch up another handkerchief.

Tuesday evening, when my plane landed, the fog wasn't using little cat feet at International Airport. It was rolling in like smoke



from the Chicago fire, only damper; dank and bone chilling. In the ill-heated taxi to the city, I kept reminding myself that San Francisco was "The Paris of the West."

"So why didn't I listen to my government about foreign travel?" I asked myself grimly.

The cabbie drove me to The Blood Shed which proved to be—surprise, surprise—in the Haight-Ashbury section. The place wasn't

open for the night's business yet. It looked particularly sinister in the shifting gray mist. A two-story shanty, flanked by a vacant lot on one side and an abandoned grocery store on the other, it dripped with some kind of phosphorescent red paint. The windows featured photos of Lizzie Borden and Ma Barker. Shuddering, I requested to be taken to 1439 Marigold Street. About five blocks away, Crazy Billy Kelso's abode looked little better than his place of business. Four stories of paint-peeling splinters just about summed it up. I didn't get out, not relishing bearding the beard in his den. I wanted others around when I met anybody officially called *Crazy Billy*. On the other hand, it had seemed like a good idea to find out exactly where the boy lived, in case he got away from me at the night club.

With a mighty snivel, I next instructed my driver to take me to any nearby hotel that was halfway decent.

The *Hotel Queen Christina* (I'm dropping the name because it's a place that should be dropped—permanently) proved not to be a serious rival for the St. Mark; unless, of course, you like unshaded light bulbs and the smell of mildew, but it was convenient, and I figured to be there only a little while, so I decided to stay. Sitting on a

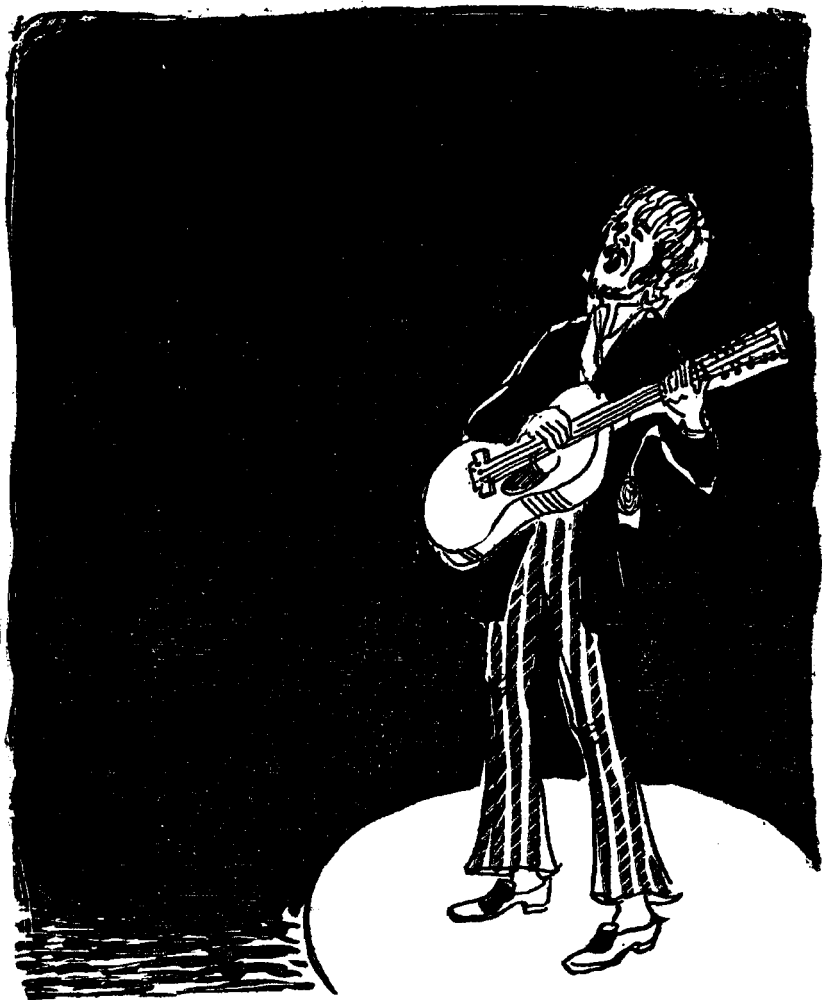
wicker chair, because the bed moaned piteously when I tried it, I stared out the window at a solid wall of California dew and collected my thoughts.

It had been a busy day, during which Tim had come up with the professional name of our hairy quarry. An agent friend had identified the pictured guitarist as one Crazy Billy Kelso. A call to a theatrical union provided us with his present whereabouts, The Blood Shed, that scenic spot in the heart of hippiedom. When it was implied that a lucrative position was in line for the fellow, his union brother very kindly supplied Crazy Billy's home address as well. After that, I'd phoned for reservations on an afternoon flight to 'Frisco and handed Tim the receiver to make arrangements for Tactic Twelve.

In the Hotel Queen I used up a few hundred tissues before it grew late enough for the first show at The Blood Shed. Walking the three blocks, I sidled in as a tall, cadaverous youth wailed the climax of his poem about Woolworth's.

The audience (who seemed to be dressed for a come-as-you-wouldn't-be-caught-dead-looking party) clapped methodically but persistently and chanted: "Yeah. Yeah. Oh, yeah."

Glancing around, I noted that the decor was 1920's abattoir. The



tables were meat packing cases, and the chairs obviously not to be trusted by anybody over thirty pounds.

I was shifting around, trying to locate one painless position, when a twang of a guitar brought me to

attention. On the infinitesimal stage, bathed in a stern, unwavering spotlight, stood either a very tall monkey or Crazy Billy Kelso. I decided it was the latter, but when he started to sing I wasn't so sure.

He went on and on about turning on a turning off and where were the flowers and the color of his true love's grass. When, at last, he stopped, his audience accorded him the same dirge-like applause and yeah, yeah-ism they'd afforded his predecessor.

As he shuffled past my table (box), I hailed him. "Cool, man," I purred.

He glanced down. "You dig?"

The incredulity in his voice I took as a compliment. "Not really," I admitted, playing it straight. "Would you sit down for a minute, Mr. Kelso? I'd like to ask you a question."

Crazy Billy's gaze roamed hastily toward the exit. His feet started to follow.

Gripping him by his sweater sleeve, I elucidated quickly, "I'm not the fuzz, Billy, honest Injun. I'm a private eye looking for Jill Kincaid."

The name halted him. He looked down at me, hesitated, decided I was harmless and sat in the—for want of a better word—chair opposite me.

"Buy me a drink?" the boy mumbled.

"Sure." I signaled the waiter, who slouched over and scowled at us.

Scratching his left armpit, my guest ordered, "Two specials."

"Thanks, I don't—" I began. "Espresso," he explained. "Double with milk. Cappuccino. You'll flip."

The long and the short of it is, I did. Now I've been around longer than I like to remember, and I should have known better than to drink anything offered by a suspect in his own lair. Our coffees had been brought with startling speed. That in itself should have made me wary, but there was something disarming about Crazy Billy, something in his eyes. Anyhow, I'd hardly asked, "Where is Jill Kincaid, Bill?" when the next thing I knew, I found myself seated on the soggy sidewalk in front of the Hotel Queen, being peered at by an understandably curious cop.

I didn't ask, "Where am I?" That corny I'm not. Besides, there's no mistaking the H.Q. It's got an *air* all its own.

The policeman helped me to my feet. I let out a deep breath, so he'd know I hadn't over imbibed.

"Feeling okay, lady?" he inquired.

"Just a little faint," I fibbed, allowing him to lead me into the lobby.

Ascertaining that I was healthy and not likely to clutter up his beat's sidewalks again, the minion of the law departed.

I darted a look at the clock above the switchboard. Ten-fifty, only thirty minutes had elapsed since I'd collapsed. If I hurried I might . . .

I pushed my size sixteen to its jogging limits and arrived at 1439 Marigold a short time later. The front door was unlocked and one feeble bulb lit the narrow hall. Sucking in what air the smog and my cold would allow me, I made for the rickety staircase and apartment 4C. In a building boasting four floors and no elevator, *my* man had to live in the penthouse. Gallantly, I hauled myself up eighty steps.

In front of 4C, I paused and for the first time thought to check my purse. Little old friend-in-need (my .25 caliber assistant) was *not* there. For a moment I debated whether or not to chance it. Those dreamy eyes of Crazy Billy's had fooled me once tonight—but where could I get a gun at this time of night? The thought of his slipping away when he, and maybe Jill Kincaid herself, were on the other side of the door, goaded me into action. With a boldness I didn't actually feel, I turned the knob. The door banged noisily open.

Crazy Bill, bent over a battered suitcase, straightened up at my entrance. Seeing who it was, he sighed regretfully.

"Ah, Moms," he said, "I'd hoped you wouldn't tail me. After I looked in your bag and found your key and took you back, why didn't you crawl into your pad and make like a good creature?"

"Where's Jill Kincaid?" I demanded.

"You're repeatin' yourself," Crazy Billy complained. "If you ain't gonna quit singin' them same lyrics, I'm gonna have to teach you some new ones." Almost in slow motion, his right arm reached toward the valise. When his hand came up, it was holding my old acquaintance, the .25. It was a complete stranger. I wasn't used to looking at it from this angle. I gulped. How crazy *was* Crazy Billy?

In spite of the sudden danger, something else, a faint rustling, caught my attention. Was it coming from the door behind Crazy Billy?

Rather loudly I said, "Now, Billy, you don't want to *shoot* anybody. I'm sure Jill wouldn't want you to *shoot* anybody."

My hunch paid off. The slim, fair figure of Miss Jill Kincaid stepped from a tiny, terribly dirty kitchen.

"You're quite right," she said to me. Turning to Crazy Billy, she commanded sweetly, "Put away the gun. I don't want you to get

into trouble just because of me."

The boy frowned. In a languid voice he said, "She's the one I told you about, Jilly. She wants to take you back to Mummy and Daddy."

"Nobody's taking me back," Jill said. "Nobody," she reiterated for my benefit.

"They've found you once. Even if we tie her up and split out of here—" Crazy Billy argued softly.

"I'm the one who's going to split, Billy. Forever." The girl gave her hirsute companion a brief kiss on the cheek. Then, to my amazement, she calmly walked to the one grimy window, raised it and climbed onto the sill.

"Jill!" I protested, taking an instinctive step forward.

Crazy Billy wagged my own gun at me. I looked playful, but loaded pistols do not bring out the fun in me. I stood still.

With an anguished look at the crouching body about to fling its young self out into the chill uncertainty of eternity, I pleaded, "Billy, you care for her. You can't let her do this."

Calmly, he responded, "Oh, I think everybody ought to be allowed to do his own thing."

I was keeping an eye on Jill and an ear for something else—if I could only buy a little time. Wildly, I threw out, "But you can't allow your own sister to commit suicide."

Did I see Jill's back stiffen?

"How'd you catch on?" Crazy Billy asked disinterestedly.

"Your eyes—they're like Jill's—and the way your parents acted, but most of all—" Jill was listening. I was, too, with all my might to—at last!—footsteps running up the stairs.

"Most of all?" Crazy Billy prompted.

"Initials. B.K. Most people who change their names keep the same initials. I—"

"Listen—" The boy waved my gun in warning.

I had to shut up. The sounds of rushing feet sounded like thunder in the squalid room.

Jill moved. I could see her muscles tensing for the leap.

"Jill!"

Did I yell? Did Tony Gardner? Did we both? Tactic Twelve! Reliable old Tactic Twelve, where the loved one takes the plane following mine.

"Go away, Tony," Jill said without stirring from her position on the window ledge.

"Jill, why? Darling, whatever you've done, it can't be bad enough for this."

"It's not what she's done," I said, hoping to keep Jill listening, and not moving closer to the edge and the end. "It's what she's afraid of doing."

"This guy?" Tony indicated our host contemptuously. "He can't mean anything to her. Jill—"

"This guy" brandished my persuader. Tony hesitated.

To keep the conversation going, I said, "He means a lot. He's her black-sheep brother."

"He's the one? She told me about him when we first became serious, but I forgot." Tony glanced curiously at Crazy Billy, then quickly reverted his eyes to Jill. "What's he got to do with this?"

"He's part of it," I said, piecing the story together as I went along. "Jill didn't want to be like him, but she didn't want to be like her parents, either. With you, she thought she had a chance for a fine, useful life. Then she met *your* parents. Am I right, Jill? Is that what frightened you, depressed you, made you run away from the man you love?"

Jill burst into uncontrollable sobs. Immediately, everything was happening. Striding up to Crazy Billy and his (my) artillery, Tony landed a beaut on his whiskered jaw. The singer slumped limply to

the floor. His assailant stepped over him, pulled the crying girl from peril and took her in his arms.

Tractably, Crazy Billy held up the gun. I accepted it and even assisted him to his unsteady feet. With a bemused look, first at the embracing couple and then at me, the musician picked up his suitcase, his guitar and strolled, humming, out of the room.

I sank to the cot that served as a bed. My nose, even in its weakened condition, had certainly worked overtime tonight.

"Honey. Darling," Tony was soothing. "We'd never— We couldn't. Haven't you any faith in me?"

The girl's voice, muffled by tears and her beloved's lapel, babbled, "I couldn't bear it. They're so— phoney, so mercenary. All four of them. All of the ones I've ever met. Oh, Tony, I couldn't bear it, if we turned out like the older generation."

"Sweetheart . . . Darling . . . My love . . ."

That, I felt, was my cue to cut the scene.



As Thomas Carlyle stated, almost a century ago: "There is endless merit in a man's knowing when to have done."



THE MAN checked an obviously expensive piece of luggage at the San Francisco Airport reservation counter. Stocky, with a round, freshly-barbered face, he wore horn-rimmed glasses and a pepper-and-salt mustache. His suit was Saville Row, his hat Wembley, and his English brogues were bench-made.

The girl immediately behind him

in line wore a sleeveless print dress and a white sweater thrown carelessly over her shoulders. "Please," she said to the man as he turned away from the counter, "did he say twenty-five minutes until the Phoenix flight?"

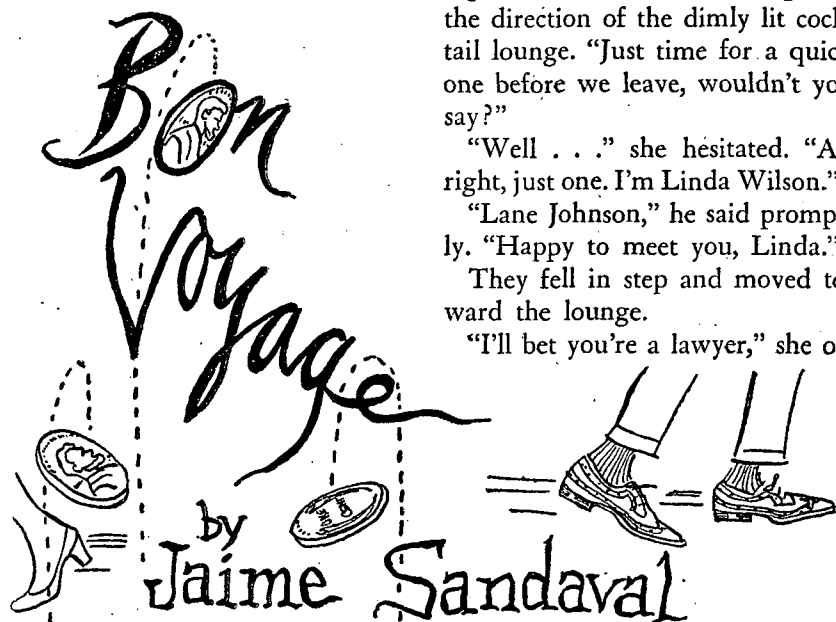
"Thirty-five," he corrected her, eyeing her good looks and slim grace with approval. "That's my flight, too." He flicked a finger in the direction of the dimly lit cocktail lounge. "Just time for a quick one before we leave, wouldn't you say?"

"Well . . ." she hesitated. "All right, just one. I'm Linda Wilson."

"Lane Johnson," he said promptly. "Happy to meet you, Linda."

They fell in step and moved toward the lounge.

"I'll bet you're a lawyer," she of-



ferred as her high heels click-clicked across the lobby.

His smile was a touch self-important. "Not bad for a guess, but I'm an architect."

"Oh, an *architect*," she said dreamily. "It must be wonderful, designing all those cathedrals."

"The money these days is in supermarkets," he said drily as he held the door for her.

"In a *very* lefthanded way we're in the same line of business," she confided as he steered them to a corner table. "I do window displays for department stores and big specialty stores. I'm going to Phoenix to talk design and price to Korricks' and to Goldwater's."

"Grade-A stores, both," he said, looking around for a waitress. "Scotch and soda sound about right?"

"Perfect."

He gave the order and returned his attention to the girl. He examined her features in detail and found no fault. "Going to be in Phoenix long, Linda?"

"It's hard to say until I get a reaction."

"I was thinking we might—"

A man materialized beside their table and dropped heavily into an empty chair. "Had helluva time findin' you, Charlie," he mumbled. His boyish features were flushed, his hair stood up in clumps on his

head, and his loosely knotted tie was well off center.

"You've got the wrong table, fellow," Lane Johnson said mildly.

The man half rose from his chair to lean across the table and peer at him owlishly. "Damn! 'Scuse me, lady. Didn' mean swear. Mus' be—mus' be—'scuse me, buddy. Definitely wrong man. Mus' be drunk. 'Scuse me." Despite supporting hands on the table top, he rocked back and forth. "Name's Davenport. Jim Davenport. No hard feelin's?" He continued right on without giving Lane Johnson a chance to reply. "I'll buy a drink show no hard feelin's." He jerked around, nearly falling. "Waitress!"

"That won't be necessary," Johnson said with an edge in his voice.

"Insis'," Davenport said. He waved a hand around the table as the waitress appeared. "Same all 'round, Maisie. Make mine a double." He sat down with a long sigh.

"I said it won't be necess—"

"You think I'm too cheap to buy a drink?" Suddenly belligerent, Davenport was standing again, his face flushed.

Linda shook her head at Johnson whose own features were undergoing a color change. "Of course we don't think you're cheap," she said soothingly. "But we don't think you should buy us a drink, either."

"Insis'," Davenport said forcefully. Smiling at Linda, he sat down again, then scowled at Lane Johnson. "Thinks 'm cheap," he muttered. He shoved a hand into a pocket, jerked it out, and bills fell like green rain on the table top. "How you like them apples, buddy? Who's cheap now?"

"Nobody except you has said one word about anyone being cheap!" Johnson retorted angrily. "Now will you kindly remove—"

"Match you for the drinks," Davenport interrupted him. "Show you 'm a sport."

"I'll get in on that," Linda said, reaching for her handbag. "Odd man pays."

"You're a good sport, lady," Davenport approved. He fumbled in his pocket again and removed a penny which he immediately dropped. "Damn! 'Scuse me, lady." He stooped uncertainly to retrieve it.

When his head disappeared below the table top, Linda leaned toward Johnson. "Turn up a head and I'll turn up a tail," she murmured rapidly. "He can't lose, and we'll be rid of him." She took a quarter from her bag.

Johnson started to object, then shrugged and reached into his pocket.

"Okay," Davenport announced, surfacing again. "Match!" He

smacked his penny onto the back of his wrist, and Linda and Lane Johnson followed suit with their coins. Davenport peered down at the head he exposed which was matched by Johnson, making Linda the loser. "Can't let you pay, lady," Davenport said firmly. "Should've been me. One more time. Tell you what—for five okay?" From the loose bills in front of him he pushed a five into the center of the table. "Odd man wins. Match!" He smacked the penny onto his wrist again.

"Well, once," Linda said. She showed a tail.

It was three seconds before Lane Johnson lifted his hand to show a head. He appeared to be thinking. Davenport exposed a tail. "Oh, dear," Linda said, opening her handbag to produce a five dollar bill. She dropped it on Davenport's, and he pushed both over to Johnson.

"Can't let my shtu—shtupidity make you a loser, lady," Davenport said. "Once for ten," and he smacked the penny onto his wrist.

Johnson followed suit immediately, Linda more slowly. Linda won the ten dollar match.

Davenport clucked to himself. "Twenny!" he said. "Odd man wins. Match!"

Linda won the twenty dollar match.

"Fifty!" Davenport urged, shoving money into the center of the table. He paused to glare at Johnson, who had made no move to produce the twenty dollars he had lost to Linda. "Well, cheapo? I saw the color of *her* money. Where's yours?"

Johnson looked at Linda. She mouthed the word "partners" silently. He nodded almost imperceptibly, took out his wallet, tossed a twenty in Linda's direction, and covered Jim Davenport's fifty. "I still say this is a foolish waste of time," he said, with every indication of amiability under stress.

Linda pushed fifty dollars into the center of the table from the money in front of her. "This will be all," she warned Davenport. "We have a plane to catch. Match!" She won the match. "I'm sorry, but we have to leave now."

"Once more," Davenport said stubbornly. "Got to win one." He shuffled together all the money still in front of him. "Once for this."

"We haven't time, have we?" Linda asked Johnson, then spoke to Davenport before Johnson could reply. "How much do you have there?" She picked up Davenport's money and counted it. "This is absolutely the last, do you understand?" She set the bills down again. "Two hundred and forty-seven dollars." She removed a roll

of money from her handbag and began counting again. Lane Johnson pushed his wallet into the center of the table. Linda paused in her counting to look at Davenport. "Do you agree that this is the last match? Absolutely?"

"Okay, okay," he said. He glowered at Johnson. "That wallet don't mean a thing to me, buddy. Count it out. No cheapo like you's gonna give me a fast count or a hard luck story afterward."

His lips a thin line in his round face, Lane Johnson picked up his wallet and counted out a stack of twenties. "I've had just about enough of you *and* your conversation," he said between his teeth. He slapped the money down. "Match!"

Linda won the match.

"No luck," Davenport said sadly. He looked as if he were going to cry. "Not a single, blinkin', unfumigated drop o' luck." He picked up his glass and drained it in two swallows. Without another word, he got up and walked away, weaving erratically between the tables until he stumbled out the cocktail lounge door.

"Well!" Linda said, picking up all the money on the table. "Did you *ever* see such a performance?" She smiled at Johnson. "Let's see what we have here."

"I suppose you didn't realize that when he changed the match from

'odd man pays' to 'odd man wins', he couldn't win?" Johnson said. "As long as you continued to show a tail and I turned up a head?"

Linda's eyes narrowed as she thought it through. "Why, that's right, isn't it? That's fantastic! How clever of you to see it so quickly." She giggled wickedly. "I must say it serves him right after the way he burst in upon us." She looked down at the money again. "Help me count this."

"We've only twelve minutes to plane time," he warned after checking his watch.

"Oh, my!" Linda jumped to her feet and picked up her handbag. "Catching that plane means a lot more to me than this—this foolishness. I'll count it when we sit down." She scooped up the money on the table and walked toward the lounge door with it in her hand.

"Put it into your bag," Johnson urged when he caught up to her after leaving money for the waitress. "It looks too much as though we—"

"So!" Jim Davenport stood squarely in their path outside the lounge door. His bloodshot eyes were focused on the money still in Linda's hand. "You two splittin' up my money, are you? Spend your time travelin' around framin' up on people, do you?" His voice rose stridently. "You two swindled me!"

Lane Johnson winced at the raucous voice. "I assure you I never set eyes on this girl until twenty-five minutes ago," he protested after a quick glance around to see who might be listening.

"That's right," Linda confirmed. "It was all your own doing. If you can't lose like a sport, why do you gamble?" She thrust the money at Davenport indignantly. "Here, take it!"

"No!" Johnson protested.

Davenport glared at him, but backed away from Linda without touching the money. "Good a sport's anyone," he muttered. He sounded mollified but still suspicious. "Maybe I jus' had bad luck. Bad day all 'round." He frowned heavily. "But I'm no fool, unnerstand? 'F I thought you two framed up on me—" he scowled at them both. "You," he pointed to Johnson, "walk that way." He waved an arm loosely. "An' you," he turned to Linda, "walk *that* way." His arm flopped in the opposite direction. "An' if I find you two snugglin' up together again, I'm gonna holler cop, y' unnerstan' me?"

"See you on the plane," Linda whispered to Johnson. He nodded, relieved, turned on his heel and marched off toward the north end of the lobby. Linda moved in the other direction, went down a short flight of steps past the car rental

offices, walked outside to the parking lot and went directly to a convertible.

Three minutes later Jim Davenport joined her, his hair brushed flat and his tie restored to its normal position. He opened the door on the passenger side for Linda.

"We got him for the twenty, the fifty, and the big push," she said as Davenport slid under the wheel. "Less the first ten that he won, I make it three seventeen of his, all told." She counted money dexterously for a moment. "Here's your end plus your bankroll."

Davenport slipped the money into his pocket and started the motor. He listened to it idling for a moment before he spoke. "I was afraid you'd rumbled the mark when you picked up the cash and started counting it, doll. You riffle that stuff faster than a pit man at Vegas."

"He was too busy congratulating himself on a sure thing," she said complacently. "How'd you get your eyes so red?"

"Rubbed them." He chuckled lightly. "How many times you fig-

ure that jerk's gonna walk up and down the aisle of the plane looking for you?"

"A time or two," she answered.

"Isn't it something the way the crossfire in the smack gets the sharpest of them?"

"I liked the way you needled him into getting the cash onto the table so it was in my hands before the breakup," Linda said.

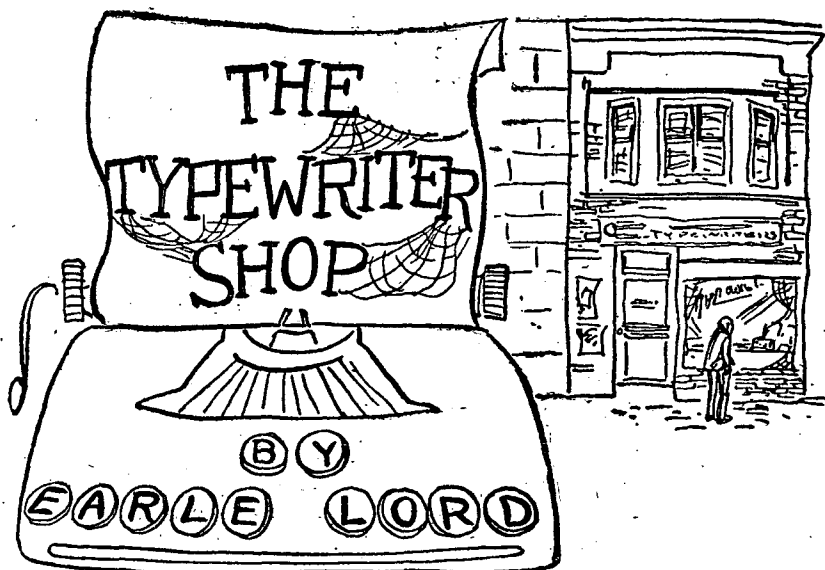
"They never catch on that after we let them win the first one I'm going to match whatever they turn up, making you the winner," Davenport said. "Well, what do you say? Call it a night?"

"Let's eat and see how we feel," she proposed. "Maybe we'll come back and see if I can find another pair of English-made brogues in the line for the 10:30 flight to New York. They're the best indicator I know. A man can have a \$300 suit without having two quarters to rub together in his pocket, but if he's got shoes like that he's not only got money, he's carrying it."

Jim Davenport drove out of the airport parking lot and headed for town.



Surely a typewriter shop could hold a key to something of import.



I ALMOST drove right by the place. It was in the middle of an industrial district, in the wrong place for a retail store. Cramped between a wholesale meat distributor on one side and a record-pressing plant on the other, it would have been easy to miss if I hadn't been looking for it.

I was driving back to Inglewood after registering for third-year classes at U.S.C. I was looking for an electric portable typewriter

exactly like the one I had used overseas. I'd tried several stores in L.A., but none of them had it. They were all stocking a newer model which I didn't want because it did not power-space. I decided to try a few of the smaller outlying shops, and this was the third one on my list from the yellow pages.

As I walked up to the shop from my car, I had some doubts that it was open for business. There was a general run-down air about the

whole establishment. Its sign was weathered and the display windows were dirty. When I got up to the store, however, my doubts vanished at the sight of the little beauty in the window. There sat Model 201C, a little dusty, but still very much there. I peered through the glass and could not see anyone in the shop, but the door opened when I tried it.

As I entered, a loud, menacing buzzer echoed in the back of the building and a man quickly appeared from the rear. He looked much more like a bouncer than a shop clerk. He stood at the swinging door between the front of the shop and the rear storeroom and glared at me.

"What do you want, bud?" he said. He did not look like he wanted to sell me anything.

"I want to buy a typewriter, a model 201C American Standard," I said, bristling a little at his manner.

He walked heavily and slowly up to the other side of the counter where I was standing, looked me straight in the eye and said, "We don't have none of those." He made it sound like a threat.

"You have one sitting in your display window," I said in dull, flat tones, feeling completely ridiculous.

He sighed at me. "It's sold," he said, not shifting his eyes from

mine, but staring belligerently.

"There's another one on the shelf directly behind you."

"That's out of order."

"Suppose we plug it in and try it, Buster," I said, losing my cool.

He shifted his feet a little and another buzzer with a different tone sounded in the back. Two more bouncer types then burst into the room and moved toward me on my side of the counter.

"We are now closing for lunch," the man said.

"At ten in the morning?" I asked brightly as I backed toward the door.

"We take a long lunch hour, buddy-boy. Out that door and don't bother coming back."

I moved, as the man said, out that door, thinking I'd blundered into some kind of commercial nut house. I backed out with all three of the goons following me. When I got out on the sidewalk in front of the place, I was preparing to run for it when the girl walked by. I'm not really a coward, but I don't believe in getting roughed up unless I at least know what I'm fighting about. I would have retreated rapidly minus my beloved typewriter, but then one of the goons made a mistake. He shoved the girl roughly out of his way. She wasn't expecting this and went down hard on the sidewalk with a

soft little piteous moan of pain.

That was a tactical error on the part of the muscle man. I guess I don't look like much, but I had just spent the last year giving instruction in hand-to-hand combat to Vietnamese infantrymen. The army had decided that because I was a gymnast and a physical education major in college that I would be just dandy for this work. I griped about the assignment, but after a two-week emergency stint as a rifleman during the Tet Offensive, I stopped complaining and served out the rest of my time happily as a dirty-fighting instructor.

I took out the first gorilla, the one who pushed girls, with a finger jab into his Adam's apple. He sat down and began to choke noisily. The next one I put down with a kick in the shins and a karate chop to the neck. The third man was hauling out an ugly-looking .45 caliber automatic when I got around to him. He would not let go of the thing until his wrist snapped, and would not sit down until I kicked him behind the knee.

A small, neatly dressed man popped out of the shop and stopped abruptly when he saw the battle scene. I pointed the gun at him.

"You'd better trot right back into that shop and call the cops and an

ambulance," I said. "Hop to it."

He raised his eyebrows at me. "You did all of this?" he asked quietly in a low, husky voice. He looked like he was smiling, but then I saw he had a scar curving up from one corner of his mouth to his left ear.

"I didn't knock the girl down. One of your boys did that."

He smiled at me. "I'll call the police," he said, and went back into the shop.

I helped the girl up. She looked a little flustered and was trembling a little.

"I'm Rudy Cirino. I guess I lost my temper when they knocked you down."

She smiled and it was a lovely thing to see. "I guess you did, Rudy. I'm Christina Valenti. I work next door. I've always wondered about the characters who hang around this place, but I never had anything like this happen before."

"I tried to buy a typewriter in there and they threw me out."

She laughed and it was a lovely thing to hear. I took a good look at her. I hadn't really paid much attention to the girl up to this point, but that nice Italian name sharpened things for me. She was a knockout! Jet black hair, chocolate brown eyes, olive skin, and a nice trim figure, even if she was wear-

ing a heavy winter overcoat on this warm spring day.

I glanced at the coat. "Think it's going to snow?"

"I have to follow my boss into the cold storage areas, sometimes. This is my working outfit."

We were smiling at one another while she told me that her boss had told her to stay away from the typewriter shop, when some tires

and brakes squealed behind us. I turned to see a black and white unit skid to a stop in front of the typewriter shop. All four of its doors burst open and four uniformed officers and one man in a blue business suit jumped out. One of the cops had a riot gun with him and he pointed it at me.

"Drop the gun, mister," he said, moving his feet wide apart.



I dropped the gun, hoping it would not fire when it hit the concrete. This officer did not look like he wanted to discuss safety procedures with anyone. The gun did not go off. One of the wounded hoods grabbed it and stuffed it inside his jacket. The cops let him do this while two of them grabbed me and threw me up against and partly over the hood of the patrol car.

When they finished their search for more weapons, they pulled me off the car, straightened me up, then spun me around and began advising me of my constitutional rights.

I turned to the man in the business suit who was quietly watching the proceedings from one side.

"Are you a police officer?"

"I'm Lieutenant Marin, Center City Police," he said. He was not a bit friendly about it.

"Your men are a little confused, Lieutenant. Those goons on the sidewalk attacked the lady and me. The gun belongs to one of them."

"We have a complaint from one of our citizens that you created a disturbance in his shop and had to be asked to leave. You are being arrested for disturbing the peace, at the least. From the looks of things here, you may be charged with assault and battery."

"That is absolutely ridiculous," Christina yelled at him. "One of

those big, brave men knocked me down. They tried to beat him up."

The lieutenant turned to her. He looked very sad. "You are also under arrest, young lady, for disturbing the peace."

They shoved the two of us into the back of the patrol car. It was screened off from the driver with heavy wire mesh. This is an unusual place to get to know a girl, but it has its points. For one thing, you have a real feel of togetherness.

We were driven to the police station in downtown Center City. We were fingerprinted and booked, then lodged in different sections of the jail. I asked for adjoining cells but they just ignored me. Christina didn't want to bother her boss so we even used the same bail bondsman. Now, there is a shared experience for you!

After the bond was posted and they checked us out of the property room, I was asked to visit Lieutenant Marin in his office. I asked Christina to wait for me and went inside.

He was being very pleasant, now. He offered me a comfortable chair and a cigarette. I took the chair.

"Mr. Cirino," he began with a warm smile, looking at a typewritten arrest report on the desk before him, "Mr. Rudolph Valentino Cirino, you certainly are a holy terror

with those hands and feet of yours. All three of those men you fought have had to be hospitalized. With this military background and training of yours, I'm afraid we may have to raise the charge to assault with a deadly weapon, just like we do with a professional fighter."

I noted his use of the word *may*. "Lieutenant, we're alone in here. You know what happened. Why the snow job?"

He looked at me thoughtfully. "You look like an intelligent man, Rudy."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. My mother wanted me to be another Valentino. I had to make up for my failure there by learning to use my head. What's the pitch?"

"You grew up in East L.A. That should have made you wise."

"I know a phony layout when I see one, Lieutenant. What's going on in the back of that typewriter shop?"

"The General Typewriter Stores are a legitimate chain of businesses operating in seven Western states, Rudy. Let's get back to your problem. You stay out of Center City and button your lip, and all charges against you will be dropped."

"What about the girl?"

"If charges against you are dropped, hers will be also. You both will be reimbursed privately for your bonding fees. There will

be no arrest records against you."

"You don't want to have a fuss."

"That is right, Rudy. We don't want to have a fuss. This is a nice, quiet little city."

"What's the name of the little guy who runs the typewriter shop?"

The lieutenant acted like I'd stuck him with a pin. "What little guy?" he said, while the top of his ears got pink.

"The little guy who called you guys in. He was wearing a three hundred dollar suit, and he had a big scar right here." I motioned from my lip to my ear.

"I didn't notice him, Mr. Cirino. What difference does it make?"

"I'm just curious to know the name of a man who can buy a police force, even a small one."

Marin gave me a look that sent a chill up my spine. He was still trying to control himself and he chose his words carefully. "Don't push me too hard, Rudy. You are getting off easy because of your war record and your enrollment in college. Are you going to cooperate with us?"

I think he wanted me to say no, but I didn't. I stood up and walked to the door. I opened it and turned to face Marin.

"You mean I'm not a punk you can easily frame. Well, I'm not a fool either, Lieutenant. You have too many chips on your side of the table."

I'll stay out of Center City and shut my mouth."

The lieutenant showed me his nice smile again. He was looking very happy when I shut the door behind me. I wondered how he faced himself in the morning.

My car was waiting for us in the police parking lot where they had impounded it. I made a dinner date with Christina for that evening, then asked her to dummy up about the whole business. I wanted to drive her back to her car by the meat distributing plant but some uniformed officers insisted on doing this for me. I drove back to my apartment in the Inglewood area and was fixing myself a snack when the door chimes rang. Another bouncer type was at the front door of my apartment with a large package. He handed me the package and an envelope and left. I opened the envelope first.

In it was a business card from the General Typewriter Stores, Center City Branch. On its back was a neatly printed message: "Compliments of the Management for your cooperation." It was signed Henry Lucero. I opened the package carefully, and there was my model 201C American Standard with power spacing and a five-year written guarantee. I inspected it for concealed explosives, but it had none and it worked fine.

Now, I'm just as nosy as the next guy but I'm not a complete sap. I still wondered what was going on in the back of that phony shop and what was going on in the Center City Police Department, but I did not think it was my responsibility to find out. There are all sorts of wrong things going on in this world we live in, and I don't think it's my job to get stepped on for trying to straighten out any of them which do not affect me personally. Life is too brief and much too uncertain.

They'd kicked me out of the store and out of Center City and I was content to let it go at that, but those bums just wouldn't leave it alone. That's the trouble with those muscle boys. They just can't stop pushing. With them, it's an occupational disease.

I suppose they wanted to be sure that I was playing it cool, so they began following me around town to see what I was doing. I have a little sports car with lots of go that I'd purchased with my overseas savings and winnings, so at first it was fun losing them in the L.A. traffic between my apartment and the university. I thought I had ditched them one day when I went to a post office near my apartment to pick up a package a buddy had sent me from Hong Kong. There must have been two cars following

me, because I know I lost one of the creeps on the Harbor Freeway.

I was standing in line waiting to pay duty on the package when I saw the picture on the wall. It was a full face and profile of the little man in the typewriter shop, the one with the expensive suits and the carved smile.

The bulletin said his name was Henry Lucano and that he was wanted for a long list of reasons including extortion, arson and hijacking. He was especially wanted for the murder of a federal narcotics officer. He had escaped with much help from a federal prison in 1964 and was believed to be a high-ranking member of the Syndicate. My temperature began to rise as I read the flyer. With my name, I had been razed all my life about being a Mafioso. This was my first direct contact with one of them and I had not even realized it.

As I stood reading the bulletin, fuming inwardly about being given the bum's rush by those cheap hoods, I began to have a funny little feeling that I was not alone. I turned my head and saw that one of my playmates from the typewriter shop, the one who pushed little girls around, was reading the bulletin with me. At least he was looking at the pictures. He did not seem to be at all surprised at what he saw before him.

He smiled broadly at me, like a shark grinning at a mackerel. "You come with me, Cirino. I think the boss wants to see you now."

"I'll bet he does," I said, looking around the post office. It was relatively clear, so I had plenty of room to take the bum down. I looked at him. "It will take at least three more just like you to make me come with you. Even then, you'd be severely outnumbered." I really hated this type of hoodlum. I'd run into a few of them in East L.A. They were tough talkers, but they'd last about thirty seconds in a real fight where people shot back at them.

He wiped off the smile. I'd hurt his feelings. He was sensitive underneath that big, rough exterior. He was also chicken. "You open that fat mouth of yours and the girl gets it quick and dirty. She's right next door to us, remember."

That is the way they operate. I'd heard about it and read about it, but I'd never had it applied to me personally. They knew I'd been seeing a lot of the girl. I guess they thought I was pretty serious about her. I thought about that for a while and decided maybe I was.

I shrugged at the creep. "Okay, you just said the magic words. What now?"

"You walk ahead of me and

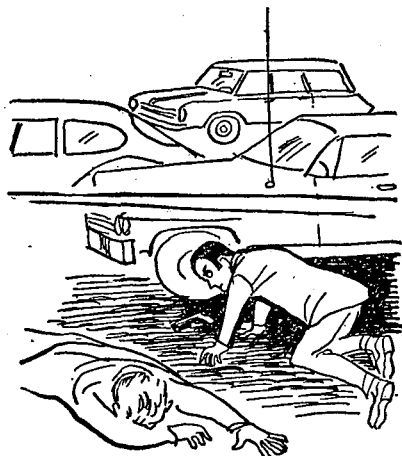
we'll go ask Mr. Lucero what to do about this," he said with a husky voice.

As we walked through the parking lot I thought it over and decided that I already knew what Mr. Lucero-Lucano was going to decide about my future. I wasn't going to have any. I glanced back to see if the goon had a gun out in the open. He had one in his right hand. I looked ahead and saw that the line of fire was clear, then spun sharply to my left, whirled around and grabbed the gun. He got off one shot which missed me by at least three inches, then stopped squeezing the trigger, because my wrist lock was pointing the gun at his chest.

"Go ahead and pull the trigger, big man. You'll blow yourself to hell ahead of schedule. Let go of the gun or I'll break your wrist."

He let go of the gun. I knew he probably had help coming up fast from somewhere so I gave him a knee lift and then fell with him to the blacktop. My timing was good. A bullet zipped over me as I fell. I crawled under a car and out to the other side, then waited on the ground. My new assailant stuck his head out from behind a truck down the lane, ducked back, then popped out again to fire at me. He missed because I had moved over a few feet, then ducked back again.

He forgot something. From where I was lying on the deck his feet were plainly visible under the truck. I fired three times and one of the rounds took his feet out from under him. I jumped back on my feet and started running for my car, which fortunately was in



the opposite direction. I did not want to spend any time answering questions about this parking lot shoot-out until I found out where Tina was. I squealed out of one end of the lot as a black and white police car rolled into the other with its siren singing.

I got to my apartment and phoned Tina at work, and asked her to get out of Center City. I told her to have her boss drive her to the Federal Building in downtown L.A. I said I'd meet her there.

Then I called the F.B.I. and told them I was coming in with information about Henry Lucano. They put an agent on the line and he told me to stay in my apartment and they'd come to me.

While I was waiting, the phone rang. It was Lucano, the big man himself.

"Rudy, come down to the shop right away."

"I've something else planned for this evening," I said, marveling at the absolute gall of the man.

"I thought you would like to see Miss Valenti before she leaves California."

"Is she with you now?" I thought he was bluffing.

"Here she is, Rudy. She's alive and well."

"Rudy," I heard her say in a trembling voice, "I tried to do what you said but it didn't work."

Lucano came back on with his smooth, oily voice. "It didn't work Rudy, because her boss works for me. He runs one of our straight operations. Now, you get on down here, boy, or we'll start sending you pieces of Miss Valenti."

He hung up. I sat by the phone and looked blankly at the wall for a while. Minutes later, the door chimes rang, and two F.B.I. agents arrived. Things were going much too fast for me. I was in a daze.

I sat the two men down, then

went to the refrigerator and poured myself a beer. I offered them ginger ale, then served them. My mind began to clear a little, so I told them the whole story, then laid out what I wanted to do. They just listened and when I finished, the older one, a man named Reynolds, asked me a few questions, then said okay.

I called the General Typewriter Store, Center City Branch, and asked for Mr. Lucero. A rough voice told me he wasn't in, but when I told him who I was, Lucero came on.

I told him I was going to write the whole thing up and have it ready to be given to the F.B.I. if there was a slipup, and that I'd trade him myself for the girl. I said I had some old army buddies standing by to back me up when we made the swap at a pedestrian bridge over a storm drain channel in Venice. I told him I'd walk out to the center of the bridge from the west side as the girl was sent out from the eastern end. Both parties could cover the proceedings with rifles just like they did in the spy movies. He was silent a bit, then said he'd call me back and hung up.

Lucero-Lucano phoned back about five minutes later. He'd checked his local geography and bought my package, probably because one end of that bridge was

in Center City and the other end was in a bare, deserted area. He said he'd have the girl at the bridge at two a.m. for the exchange, and warned me not to play any games with her life.

We were waiting at our end of the bridge at two in the morning, watching the fog drift in from the bay, when two cars pulled in at the other end and beamed their lights straight down the walkway. I watched the slim, trim figure of a girl step out of one of the cars and start walking toward the center, then I started towards her, worrying that it might not be Tina. It was my girl, however. We paused for a moment in the center. She was trembling and started to cry, but lifted up her chin and held her head high when I told her to show those bums what a lady could do. She believed me when I told her that I knew what I was doing. I wished at the time that I had some of her confidence in my powers.

When I got to the other side, the goons put my hands behind my back and handcuffed me. They frisked me roughly, laughed merrily about the bulletproof vest I was wearing and took it off, saying I didn't trust them. They didn't notice the gadget I was wearing on my wrist. It looked like a watch but it actually was a little radio transmitter that sent out a signal.

I was shoved into the back of one of the cars by two men I'd never seen before. A third man, one of the men who had muscled me out of the typewriter shop, was driving. Lucano was not present.

"Where's the boss?" I asked pleasantly.

"You'll see him in a few minutes, funny man," the driver said. "He wants to talk to you before he leaves the country. He told us to wrap you in tissue paper. We're not supposed to hurt you."

"He's very fond of me," I said, showing them how brave I was.

"Yeah, like the Israelis like Nasser," the gorilla on my left said.

They were quite a little comedy team. "How about like the Mafia likes J. Edgar Hoover?" I said, trying to participate in this group effort.

Neither of them laughed. The one on the left cuffed me in the mouth with the back of a large meaty hand.

"That was not very funny, punk. Don't press your luck. We could accidentally hurt you when you were trying to run away from us."

I decided not to be a comedian anymore with this particular audience, and we made the rest of the trip back to the old typewriter shop in a strained atmosphere of silence.

They walked me into the place through a rear entrance. The es-

tablishment was much more impressive from this direction. There was nothing run-down or dusty about the rear of the building. We walked along a well-lit concrete loading platform bustling with activity. Two large tractor-trailers were being loaded with boxes stenciled, Typewriters. I wondered what else was being shipped out of California besides office machinery. I noticed that one of the trailers had Arizona tags and permits on it while the other was cleared for Nevada and Utah.

The back room I'd been wondering about was about ten times larger than the shop in front. It was stacked around the sides and up and down with aisles of packaged typewriters and adding machines, mostly foreign makes.

There was a clear space in the center of the room with a heavy table and four chairs in it. A transistor radio on the table was playing soft background music. Lucano, still dressed up like he was going to a funeral, was seated at the table playing gin rummy with two men. He had a pile of suitcases waiting for him at one side. He stood up and gave me a wisp of a smile as I was shoved up to the table.

"Mr. Rudolph Valentino Cirino," he said unctuously. "I'm very happy to see you again before I leave.

Take the cuffs off him, boys. A nice little Italian boy like Rudy has to have his hands free to talk. He may even want to plead a little."

I had nothing to say. I rubbed my wrists when they took the cuffs off and enjoyed watching the hoods back out of my reach. They had evidently been well-briefed about me.

"You sit down at that end of the table, Rudy, and I'll sit down here at this end," Lucano said. "You'll notice that the legs of the table are bolted to the floor."

I'd already noticed that sad fact, but said, "That's too bad," as if it were a revelation. Lucano laughed. Then the three lesser bums laughed. I noted that they waited for Lucano to decide if something was funny. I also noticed that all three of them had guns out, now that my hands were free. Those clowns made me feel like a four hundred pound Bengal tiger.

I looked around the big room. The nearest row of boxed typewriters was ten feet to my left and was about seven feet high.

"Put your hands on the table," Lucano said sharply.

Like the man said, I put my hands on the table and was not a bit happy about it. The little radio on the table had been picking up the pulsed beat from the phony

watch on my wrist, though nobody paid any attention to it except me, but with my hands on the table the beep got louder. My wrists stuck out of the sleeves of my jacket and the watch was plainly visible. Its hands proclaimed that it was eight-thirty. I tried not to look at the watch. Instead, I gazed into Lucano's eyes.

"Your watch has stopped," Lucano said, getting right to the heart of the matter.

I looked at the damn thing and listened to the radio beeping merrily away three feet away from it. "I must have forgotten to wind it. I've had a lot on my mind today."

"I guess you have. That was a noble thing you did tonight, Rudy, trading your life for that of a girl you've known only a few days. I wanted to compliment you on that before I left."

"Some of us square Italians have courage, Mr. Lucano. Some of us even try to earn an honest living. As a matter of fact," I said, warming to the occasion and feeling that as long as I was talking I was still living, "most of us manage to exist without pushing around old men, women, and other people who can't fight back."

Lucano got a little pale. He leaned forward. "Some of us keep our big noses out of other people's business. You are upsetting a three

million dollar operation and running me out of my own country, and you are doing this for nothing. Well, you are going to pay for your stupidity and foolishness now. I intend to see you die before I leave."

He stood up, and I stood with him and prayed for a break. I needed one badly. Then, the good Lord gave me a little one.

A man burst in from the loading platform. He was carrying a transistor radio and it was beeping much louder than the one on the table.

"There's a bug in this place. I just drove in from Hollywood and it gets louder all the way in."

They were all looking at him with their mouths wide open when I made the handspring. I mentioned that I used to be a gymnast; I found out I still was one. I jumped forward and down toward the nearest row of typewriters, hit the floor hard with my hands, then did the most beautiful high running flip of my athletic career. My landing may not have earned me many points, but it was on the other side of that gorgeous aisle of typewriter cases.

I lit out down the row toward the front of the store while the goons were still staring at one another. Then I got another break, a big one this time. At the end of the row, on the wall separating the

shop in front from the warehouse in the rear, I found a black box full of electrical switches. I pulled it open and pulled every handle in it, and all the lights went out.

I crawled through the swinging door, then got up and ran through the shop and out the front door into the parking lot, feeling I was home free. Then a man with a submachine gun stepped out from behind one of the parked cars and told me to freeze. I was getting ready to try to take the thing away from him and feeling pretty blue about my chances of doing so, when another man came up behind him. It was Reynolds, one of the agents who had backed me at the bridge, so I relaxed and began breathing normally again.

I then sat back and enjoyed the show while several platoons of F.B.I. agents shot it out with the creeps inside the building. The actual fire fight lasted about three minutes, then white flags began waving. That was longer than I expected. The F.B.I. wouldn't let me borrow a weapon, but they did let me speak to Lucano before they

hauled him away to the station. He was concentrating on maintaining his composure and dignity when he was brought up to a waiting police car. He wasn't even mussed up! I stepped in front of him.

"You need better help, Lucano. Your employees are a bunch of bums."

He shook his head at me sadly and his eyes began to water, he was that angry at me. I grinned at him.

"What the hell did you get out of this, Cirino?" he yelled at me.

"I got the typewriter I came for. I'll send you a check for it in jail. And I got something I didn't plan on, oh high and mighty crime chieftain!"

He turned away from me and tried to look indifferent. He didn't like being made sport of by squares. "I don't really care, but I suppose you'll tell me, anyway."

I did not tell him anyway. Instead, I walked away without saying another word to him. I did not feel like discussing Christina Valenti with any two-bit hood.



Purportedly, gratitude is the sign of noble souls; intuitively, however, it is the "lonely" soul who is, shall we say, eternally grateful.

I USUALLY close my place up at one a.m., but this morning I didn't feel like going home—not just yet. Ethel would still be awake and upset and worried about the murders. Every woman in the city was worried about the murders.

I walked down to the end of the bar, reached under the counter and hit the light switch, and the neon beer signs in the front windows flickered out. At this time of the morning there are hardly enough customers, paying customers, to cover the cost of my electricity.

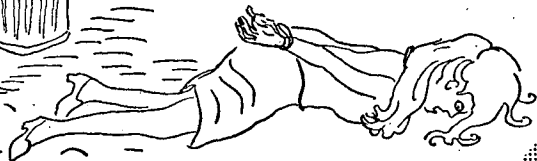
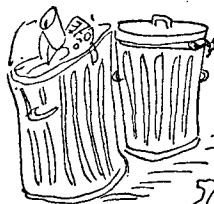
The big sign out front was still blinking away, however, flashing

out on the dark wet street, trying to attract the lonely wayfarer. It spelled out in red, white and blue neon: *The Broken Drum—You Can't Beat It*. It was a lousy name for a bar, a lousy name for any-



The

STRANGLER



by James E. Thomas

thing for that matter, but it was there when I bought the place eight years ago, and it was paid for.

"Gimme another one of those, Eddie," Joyce said. She pushed her empty glass across the bar in my direction and tossed a five dollar bill on the counter. "And gimme some more change for the phone."

I filled the glass with a double shot of bourbon and plunked the change on the bar in front of her. "It's against my better judgment to say this since I am in the business," I said, "but you're drinking too much."

She tried to wink at me, but both eyes closed in the process. She picked up her drink and tottered in the direction of the phone booth.

Joyce, the only customer in the place, was a washed-out blonde, somewhere between the ages of thirty and forty. It was getting harder to tell every day. She had a good body, buxom, but it was turning sloppy. It seemed like I could notice a little more deterioration each night. She wasn't a professional, but more like a long-time amateur. She would pick a man up in my place and like as not pay him for the companionship. She was lonely, especially tonight, because the man she'd been living with for the past two weeks had moved on to another job in another city.

"This town is dead. And your place is dead," she said, ambling back to the bar.

"It's the rain," I said, pointing toward the front windows, "and the hour, and the neighborhood."

She tossed the remaining coins on the bar in front of her. "Where the hell is everybody?"

"I told you, the rain—and the Strangler."

She grimaced. "Why'd you have to remind me of that?" She sat down on a stool and wriggled the skirt of her black dress up until she was comfortable. "This girdle is killing me."

She stared down into her drink for a moment. "You don't need this stuff, Eddie," she said. "You're what—thirty-five, thirty-six, married, nice looking guy, apparently happy . . ." She took a big slug of her drink. "How come bartenders never drink, Eddie?"

"No profit in it."

She pointed toward the TV set. "How's the movie going?"

I have a portable set on a shelf behind the bar. I turned the sound up. It was *Casablanca*. I'd seen the movie twenty times but still enjoyed it. *Play it again, Sam*.

"He was great, wasn't he?" Joyce said as Bogart's face flashed on the screen. Then Claude Rains' image appeared. He was standing in front of an airport hangar as a plane

roared down the runway. The picture was almost over.

"You've got a lot of guts just being out at this hour," I said. "Ethel, my wife, won't step out of our apartment after the sun goes down."

Joyce took a taste of her drink, then looked at me. She had pleasant blue eyes once you got past the layer of mascara. "I'm night people," she said. "I won't stay *in* my apartment after the sun goes down."

"Even with the Strangler on the prowl?"

She shuddered. "This is the week, isn't it? I wonder if that's his lucky number."

The movie ended and a title card stating *Late News Wrap-Up* flashed on the screen. An announcer's voice sounded happy to report that the top local news story was still the Strangler. It told how he was a clever murderer who had eluded the police for over three months, and how he always struck during the first and last week of the month, and how today was Friday of the first week in June and he still had not chosen his victim, and how he did not sexually assault this victim but tied her hands behind her back with brown twine, shoved a gag in her mouth, and choked the life out of her with a coat hanger, and how he would—

"Turn that thing off," Joyce said.

"What's that announcer's name? Marquis de Sade?"

I punched the button on the set and the picture shrank to a pinpoint of light. Then the rattle of glass in the front door and the sound of rain hitting the street made both of us turn quickly in that direction. Standing in the doorway was a thin young man, slightly over six feet tall. He was wearing a brown tweed suit, dark brown now, as it was soaked with water. Tweed's all right if you like it, except this was June and the temperature had hit the low nineties during the day. Oh well, maybe he only had one suit.

He pushed the door closed and walked toward us. Probably because we had both been staring hard at him, he said, "Nice night for a murder."

Joyce shuddered and glanced at the wall clock behind the bar. It read 1:32. All the Strangler's murders had occurred sometime after 1:30.

"Look," I said to him, "customers I need, but comedians I don't. The lady here is nervous enough about that whole affair."

He peered at Joyce and a sincere look flashed across his face. "I'm sorry, miss, if I frightened you," he apologized.

I had a better look at his face now. My bartender's eye fixed his

age at twenty-four. He was handsome, in an actorish sort of way—almost pretty.

"I'll have a draft beer," he said, glancing back at me.

I tapped the beer for him and tossed him a bar towel. "You look like you need to dry off some."

"Yeah, thanks." He rubbed the towel across his face and through his dark hair. "I've been walking out there . . . well, must have been for hours."

Joyce spoke for the first time. "Big decision to make? Or just no place to stay?"

He shrugged and smiled. "Kind of a combination of both."

She returned his smile. Joyce was always a sucker for a pretty face.

He tossed the towel back to me, sat on the stool next to Joyce, and swallowed down about half his beer.

"That hits the spot," he said nodding in my direction. Then he turned back to Joyce. "Yeah, kind of a combination of both. I've been trying to decide whether I should stay here in the 'big city' and try to make a go of it, or head back to Kansas."

"What did you decide?"

"I haven't. Not yet. I've got till 2:35 to come to a decision."

"Why the deadline?"

"Because that's when my bus leaves." He jerked a thumb in the

general direction of the bus station, two blocks from my place. "I shoved my belongings in a locker down there and I've got my ticket right here," he said, patting his coat pocket. "But still no final decision."

Joyce took a sip of her drink, then asked, "Why such a big battle with your conscience?"

"I don't know," he said. "I was beginning to like it here. I've been here almost six months now, got out of the navy in December, and didn't want to go home." He shrugged his shoulders. "But I finished off my second job today."

"Fired?" she asked.

"Fired. Quit. A little of both. I was working in a photo shop, in the lab. The boss told me I was doing something wrong. The navy sent me to three schools and I headed up a photo lab for two years, but *he's* going to tell me how to do my job. That's why I got out of the service," he said bitterly. "Somebody always telling you what to do." Then he laughed. "I was always in trouble in the navy too." He looked at her and smiled. "What's your name?"

"Joyce. What's yours?"

"My name's Frank."

The front door rattled again and a large figure loomed up in the doorway. As it moved into the light, I recognized Lieutenant Donovan of the 35th Precinct. I headed

down the boards in his direction.
"Evening, Bob."

He shook the water off his gray hat and struggled out of his raincoat.

"Hello, Eddie," he said, smiling.
"How have you been?"

He tossed the raincoat and hat on the stool at the end of the bar and sat down next to it. He was a big man with a moon-shaped face and bald, except for a small patch of black hair near the back of his head. In his early forties, a widower with no children, he didn't mind spending the extra hours police work required. With the Strangler around, everyone on the force worked extra hours whether they minded it or not.

I mixed him a Scotch and water and handed the glass to him. "You're working pretty late," I said.

"So are you," he said, taking a swallow of the drink. "I thought you closed at 1:00 a.m."

"My license says 2:00."

He laughed. "Hold on, Eddie. I wouldn't say anything if you were open till 4:00. I was just surprised to find your lights burning when I drove by. Surprised and glad. I like a drink before I go to bed. Helps me relax after a busy day. And this has been a busy day."

"How's the case been going?"

He made several wet circles on

the bar top with his glass and studied them for a moment. Then he looked up and smiled. "Well, if you pay any attention to the newspapers you know that all we've done for the past three months is sit on our rumps, twiddle our thumbs, play pinochle, or sleep. We don't care about capturing this murderer. We're either indifferent to him or in cahoots with him." He took a big slug of his drink. "You'd think the papers would appreciate our difficulties."

"It makes good copy."

"The hell with their copy," he said.

The stranger's voice shouted from the other end of the bar. "Hey, Mr. Barkeep, another drink for the lady here, and a beer for me."

I walked down to them, fixed the drinks, and he paid me. I glanced at the clock: almost 1:45. I looked at Joyce and smiled. "Better make this the last one. I have to close at two." Then I walked back to where Bob was sitting.

"Who are the two lovebirds?" he asked.

I looked back down the bar. Frank was holding one of Joyce's hands in his and nuzzling her neck with his lips. He was a fast worker.

"The girl you may have seen before," I said. "She's a regular. The guy came in about 1:30. He's a stranger. Calls himself Frank."

Bob nodded his head absent-mindedly, then swallowed some more of his drink.

"You and Captain Morris still running the case?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Everybody from the mayor on down is running the case. But, yeah, Morris and I are still officially in charge."

"Any new leads?"

He finished off the drink and pushed the glass toward me. "Give me one more of those, Eddie." When I'd fixed him a fresh one and handed him the glass, he said, "Yeah, we've got one we've been working on. The newspapers don't even know about it. You know that brown twine the Strangler uses to tie the victim's hands?"

I nodded to his question.

"Well, there's nothing special about the twine," he said. "You can get it anywhere; supermarket, drug-store. I even have some of it in my apartment. But what *is* special is the way he ties the twine, a special knot. It's not just a coincidence, either. He's used the same knot on all six victims. It could mean he's a sailor, or in some other line of work where handling rope and tying knots is important. So, all we have to do is line up every sailor, boy scout, sea scout in town . . . Oh, the hell with it." He looked disgusted. "Some clue!"

"Well, if it's all you have . . ."

"Yeah, Eddie, but it's practically worthless." He gripped his glass tightly in his hands, as if he were trying to crush it. "We're going to be late again, Eddie, I just know it. I can feel it in my bones, all the way down to these flat feet of mine. He's going to kill another one and there's nothing we can do to stop him. He's overdue, and all day I've had a premonition that I couldn't shake. Tonight's the night. It's got to be tonight."

"Nothing's been reported yet."

"No. Not yet."

He took another pull on the drink, shrugged, then emptied the glass. "I drink too much, and talk too much. Sorry to unburden my troubles on you."

"That's what bartenders are for, they say."

He looked at his watch. "Almost 2:00. Time for me to go home."

"Time for me to close up. Ethel will be worried about me."

Bob paid for his drinks and I moved down toward the two 'love-birds'.

"Time for me to close up, folks."

Frank moved his hand off Joyce's knee and stood up. "Right, boss," he said. "We're going," and he started helping Joyce with her coat.

I checked the back door, turned off the lights in the rest rooms, and made all the other little nightly

checks. When I'd worked my way back to where they were standing, I asked, "What did you decide?"

He looked mystified. "About what?"

"About whether or not you're going to leave the 'big city' and go back to Kansas."

"Oh, that! I haven't come to a final decision yet." He put his arm around Joyce. "Joyce is going to help me decide that one."

Joyce smiled up at me. "Well, good night, Eddie," she said. "You take care now."

"Yeah," I muttered.

Bob had his hat and coat on by now and opened the front door.

"Well, the rain has stopped, anyway," he said. "That's something. See you, Eddie."

I waved at his back as he went out.

Joyce finished buttoning her raincoat and she and Frank started toward the door.

"Good night," she said again.

"Yeah," I answered. I didn't want her leaving with that guy, but what could I do about it?

The door closed behind them and I started counting the money in the cash register. \$44.38, not enough to bother with locking in the safe. I stuffed it into a paper bag and hid it behind some bottles on a bottom shelf.

Then I walked up to the front of

the place and looked out the windows. Joyce and Frank were standing on the sidewalk and were involved in what is known as a 'heated embrace'. The sidewalk was no public place to them. That Frank was a fast worker.

I hit the light switch and *The Broken Drum* flickered out. That would give them a little more privacy.

The hell with sweeping up. I was too tired, and the few customers had done little but track in some water. I grabbed my jacket off a hook by the door and took a final glance around the place. Then I heard the scream.

Running out the door, I spotted Joyce and Frank down at the corner of the building, where he seemed to be trying to drag her up the alley. He had one hand on her throat and the other on her purse, and she was flailing around, struggling with all her might, but it was a losing battle.

I caught him by surprise. Coming up hard with my left, I connected with his chin and he sat down on the wet pavement with a smack.

"That little . . . creep!" Joyce said, gasping for breath, and leaning against the side of the building for support. Then she started to cry. Even in the dim light I could see mascara run down her cheeks.

He was still dazed, but his face was beginning to take on an intelligent look again.

I nudged him with my shoe. "Well?"

"I only wanted her purse. I need the money bad. I told you I was fired, only it wasn't today. It was almost three weeks ago." He looked up at Joyce. "I'm sorry . . . miss. I don't know what got into me. I've never done anything like this before."

Joyce was crying hard. I doubt if she even heard what he said.

He turned to me. "Honest, mister," he said. "I'm broke, that's why I did it. Please don't turn me in."

I drew my foot back to kick him and said angrily, "Get out of here."

He scampered back on all fours, got up on his feet and gained his balance and broke into a run. He rounded the nearest corner and was out of sight.

I put my hand on Joyce's shoulder. "You all right?"

She nodded her head. She had calmed down to the sobbing stage now.

I picked up her purse and handed it to her. She took it, reached inside and started dabbing at her eyes and wet face with a wad of used tissues.

"Thanks," she said. "If you hadn't come along, I don't know what would have happened." Then a

startled look came over her face and she seemed even more frightened. "Do you think he was the . . . Strangler?"

I shrugged. "No." I put my hand on her shoulder again. "Think you can make it?"

"Yes," she said. She was regaining her composure quickly.

I nodded in the direction of the bar. "I still have to lock up."

"Okay."

I started to move off.

"Eddie," she said, "I hate to ask you this—you've already done so much for me—but there's probably not a taxi within five miles of here. Would you mind walking me home? It's only three blocks."

"Sure," I said. "Just let me lock up."

I walked quickly back to the bar, turned off the remaining lights, and locked the door. As I dropped the key into my jacket pocket, I felt to see if the small ball of brown twine was there. It was. I would use the same knot again this time. I'd been wondering how long it was going to take the dumb cops to start following up that false clue.

I walked back to Joyce. "All set?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, and as we moved off down the street: "Oh, Eddie, I don't know how I can ever thank you for this."

The contention that "some things are not for amateurs" has its pros and cons. Read on.

RADFORD MULLIGAN was a wide man with curling orange hair and an uncompromising mouth, a New York City bus driver who had need of relaxation after a day's typical stress. He found his relaxation



mainly within his suburban home, some three-quarters of a mile east of the borough of Queens, where he was unquestioned master of the home and of his childless, revering wife, Libby. Here was peace, with no crowds, no endless stupid questions, no change fumlbers, no screaming children, no dirty looks, no snarls, no threatening, massed traffic, no fumes, no maddening delays, no long travels to nowhere, simply peace, sweet peace.

One way in which Mulligan relaxed at home was by building ships in a bottle; he was working on one now. He prided himself on using no tricks. In his basement workshop he made every part himself, down to the most minute. He liked to do the assembly upstairs at the big oak table in the living-room, on the back of which were displayed on stands the models he had completed, each a gem within its bottle, sailing eternally in its own private, hushed world. There was the clipper, Red Jacket; the Constitution, of course, facing its opponent, the Guerriere, in another bottle; the old thirty-four gun Bon Homme Richard, the frigate Chesapeake. He was working now on the fifty gun Leopard. He used tools which he had fashioned himself—long, thin tongs, rods, spoons—assembling and gluing within the narrow-necked bottle. He never

used a bottle with a neck wide enough to admit the entire hull; he considered that child's play.

Mrs. Mulligan, a thin woman with dark placating eyes, was working on a braided rug. She had been working on the rug for six years, and whether or not it ever became a finished nine by twelve oval, it kept her hands busy. She said now, "I hope he don't come around here."

After a while Mulligan said, "Who?"

"The Creeper."

Mulligan put down a tool, turned in his chair and looked at his wife. "Who is the Creeper?"

"Haven't you seen it in the newspapers? He's a burglar. He burgles the suburbs. He gets into houses when people are away or asleep, and they say he's so quiet that no one ever wakes up. They call him the Creeper for that reason. He's burgled about twenty houses already, they say."

Mulligan considered. This was his castle. He was warm, comfortable, serene here. He would not stand for intrusion. The thought of it made him furious. "He better stay away from here," he said.

Libby nodded.

"For his own sake," Mulligan added.

Libby looked at him, faith in her eyes.

Mulligan's face suddenly changed. He said, "Hey, it's getting cold in the house. Do you feel cold?"

Libby turned her body into a thermometer. "Yes," she said at last.

Mulligan went to the thermostat. "It's sixty-nine. It's supposed to be seventy-four. The oil burner must be off."

"Again?" Libby said.

"Again." Mulligan felt his wrath turn in a different direction. He had a right to warmth in his own home during cold weather. He had paid for warmth. When he didn't get it, his peace and comfort were ruined. "What kind of an oil burner did Kropowicz put in? Been in less than a year and always giving trouble. I should have kept the old one."

"I suppose it takes time to adjust them."

"It does not!" Mulligan started to curse. He knew every bad word in the language and often used them on the city streets, but in his own home, in front of Libby, he didn't feel it was right, so he used substitutes. He had gotten the idea out of a book. "—that jangled, hobnailed, litigated, polluted Kropowicz," he finished.

Libby shuddered. Mulligan did not realize that the effect was the same as regular cursing.

"I'm going down to the basement," he said.

"Watch out," Libby warned. "The Creeper just might be down there."

Mulligan went down and hit the button on the safety device. The oil burner came on again with a minor explosion. Mulligan went back up. The house was vibrating briskly; then it settled down to a gentle trembling.

"Is it working just right, dear?" Libby asked. Then the trembling stopped and Libby said, "I think it's off again."

Mulligan clumped back down. He hit the button. The burner failed to respond. He clumped back up, face expressionless. "Plumbers like Kropowicz ought to be hung up by the—toes," he said. "R. Kropowicz, Plumbing and Heating. It should read R. Kropowicz, Ruining and Cheating, that demobilized, fumigated, jiggled robber." He moved to the phone in the foyer.

"Don't fight with him, Radford," Libby called. "We need him."

Mulligan spoke slowly and deliberately into the phone, replaced it gently in its cradle.

"What did he say?" Libby asked.

"He can't promise to make it tonight. The weather's close to zero outside, and he can't promise."

"Don't get excited, Radford," Libby said.

"That bill for changing the kitchen faucet," Mulligan said in a very quiet voice. "A ten minute job for an honest man. Kropowicz charged me for four hours of his time and four hours for an assistant's time."

"Please don't get excited."

Mulligan's voice became even quieter. "He charged a hundred and seventy-eight dollars to move a radiator. Do you remember the bathtub drain? Do you remember what he took to fix that little bathtub drain?"

"Plumbers are expensive these days."

"They are," said Mulligan. "Too floating expensive. Especially when they're the only ones in the neighborhood. Kropowicz has got it all his way around here. Try to get somebody to come a few blocks further and they laugh at you. They're all too busy at seven dollars an hour. That's the way it is these days, the plumbers are kings. Pretty soon the only millionaires are going to be the plumbers. The last time the radiator sprung a leak I made nineteen calls to get some other plumber. The best I could get was a three-day maybe. Kropowicz put in the oil burner. Why doesn't he see that it keeps working?"

"It's getting colder," Libby said. "We better go to bed. We can use

the electric heater in the bedroom."

"I told Kropowicz I'd leave the basement door unlocked in case he comes."

"The Creeper might get in."

"I'd like to see him," Mulligan growled. "I'll Creeper him."

The cold gained steadily on the electric heater overnight. In the early morning Mulligan pried himself out of bed, washed in icy water and dressed. Libby put on two sweaters, a robe, a pea-jacket and a pair of Mulligan's trousers. "It's thirty-four degrees in the house," she said.

"If I see Kropowicz now I'll wallop him," Mulligan said.

"You'd kill him."

"Just one good wallop."

"Please go to work, Radford," Libby said nervously. "The buses must run."

"That's what saves him," Mulligan said. "The buses got to run."

That evening, Mulligan returned home to find the house warm again. "Fixed it, did he?"

"Here's the bill."

Mulligan looked at it and felt his face swelling. He felt the blood roaring around the roots of his hair. "Two hundred and nineteen dollars? Six dollars an hour apiece for two helpers on top of his own labor? Seven hours labor? All those parts?"

"The guarantee's run out, he

said. He said there were complications. He said a water pipe froze and split. He said that's why the faucet didn't work this morning."

"I should have taken a service contract," Mulligan said. "Kropowicz talked me out of it. Promised he'd take care of the oil burner. He's taking care of it all right. It's his fault the pipe froze."

"Come to supper," Libby said.

After supper, Mulligan turned to his hobby. With infinite patience he manipulated tiny parts into place and held them while the glue set. As he grew more absorbed inside the bottle, his face smoothed, he felt a measure of peace returning. Libby took up her braided rug . . .

That night, Mulligan had a pleasant dream. It was that he and Libby were at Niagara Falls, a place they had always wanted to visit. The river was a torrent of silver. In the lovely glow of the full moon, myriad drops scintillated and shimmered like tiny stars. Over the brink, majestically, dropped the massive waters, down the awesome depth they dropped, falling, falling, with an eternal rushing, spilling sound . . .

He came awake. Libby was shaking him. "Radford, I think I hear water running in the basement."

Out of bed jumped Mulligan. Through the bedroom and living-room he tore, striking something,

barely conscious of a crash. Down the basement stairs he dashed, flicking on the light.

Water was shooting from a pipe, the pipe Kropowicz had repaired. The drains were flooded. The floor was inches deep. The rumpus room was flooded. His workshop was flooded. Mulligan turned off the main valve and stalked back upstairs. He turned on the livingroom light. Next to the oak table lay a debris of glass, spars, masts, rigging. The clipper, Red Jacket, had fallen off the table when he ran into it.

In that moment, Mulligan made up his mind to kill Kropowicz.

When Libby came in, he said with total calmness, "Call Kropowicz tomorrow. Tell him to come and fix the pipe."

"Radford!" Libby said. "Please don't get so excited."

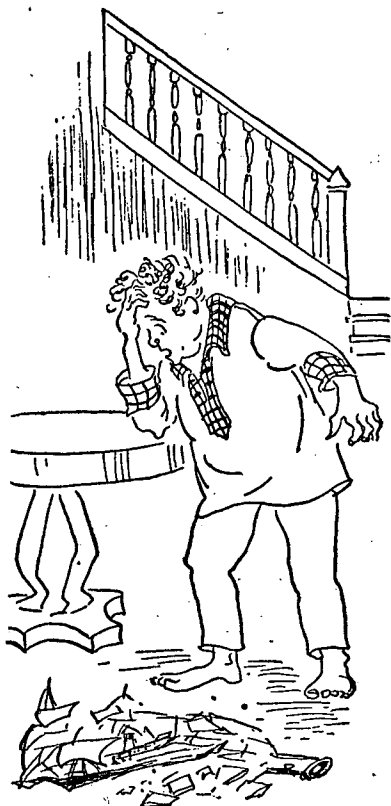
"Accidents will happen," Mulligan said nonchalantly. "It's nothing. Let's forget about it," but Mulligan knew in his mind that he would kill him. The man had shattered his peace too often. He would kill him. Kill. Kill.

"I don't like the way you're talking, Radford."

"Let's go back to bed," Mulligan said pleasantly. *Yes, kill*, he was thinking. *Kill Kropowicz.*

"If you would only curse."

"It's not worth getting upset about," Mulligan said blandly. *Kill.*



ford. Please. I couldn't bear to lose you."

Mulligan laughed suavely. "Don't worry, Libby. I forgive him." *Kill.*

Driving his bus in the days that followed, Mulligan found new refreshment in pondering how Kropowicz could be done to death without risk to himself. He thought slowly and with deliberation, each new concept coming laboriously, but with love, a true act of creation. Of course the most convenient way would be if Kropowicz crossed in front of his bus. He'd iron Kropowicz right into the street like a quarter—but he wouldn't be that lucky.

Suppose he went to Kropowicz' shop—say, to pay a bill—and found the chance to hide a bomb there, under a counter, or inside one of the colorful display toilets, swell shrapnel that would make . . . No, that wasn't sure, might get the wrong person, a customer, or a helper, which wouldn't be too bad being another plumber, but he wanted Kropowicz.

Put the bomb in Kropowicz' truck? Might still get a helper instead. In Kropowicz' private car, then? Usually parked around the shop. Under the hood or under the seat? Maybe. Take a little studying on how to put a bomb together.

How about a plain, ordinary

Libby looked at him with the penetration and concern of a childless woman who has concentrated all her natural feelings upon one man. Her dark eyes widened as they studied Mulligan. She said, "Radford, you're thinking of killing him."

"What?" Mulligan said. "Oh, no, no. Never entered my head. Don't be silly."

"Stop thinking this way, Rad-

shooting? He could act like a masked holdup man, gun Kropowicz down in his shop. Could be, but there was some risk. Ambush Kropowicz in some dark street? From his car? Maybe not; if somebody spotted the license plates, the car could be traced. Suppose he stole a car? No, getting too involved; all he wanted was to kill Kropowicz. Better to learn Kropowicz' habits, pick him off some night from a doorway or alley, pow, pow, pow, dead Kropowicz, get away fast. Always the chance of unexpected witnesses, though. Even if he used a silencer, there was a chance of being seen, apprehended. The police did smart work with ballistics these days, have to dispose of the gun permanently. Have to get hold of one in the first place without being traced . . .

What about a simple knock on the head with some heavy weapon. More satisfying, too. What weapon? Hammer? Rock? Brick? Wrench? Have to get Kropowicz alone, probably at night. Again, have to dispose of the weapon. Baseball bat? A baseball bat could be burned afterwards—but conspicuous, meanwhile. A short wooden club? Pipe? That would be fitting, a short section of plumbing pipe. Had a couple in his own plumbing at home. Disconnect one, bop Kropowicz, clean it, put it back. Who'd

think of looking for a murder weapon in a plumbing system?

Poison, now. Poison worked at a distance. Poison was quiet, safe, if less satisfying. Send Kropowicz some phony advertising, some free offer he couldn't resist, cyanide on the return envelope he'd have to lick . . . Maybe. Or cigarettes. Kropowicz smoked. Send him free samples, poisoned cigarettes . . .

Mulligan was in no hurry to arrive at a method. Mulling over the possibilities, savoring the various ways in which Kropowicz could be killed was in itself relaxing. His disposition improved. He grew very patient in all things, knowing that sooner or later he would get Kropowicz.

At home, he worked contentedly on his shipbuilding, at times stopping to stare into space with a smile. Libby noted this with fear and concern.

"Radford," she would say, "please, please put this out of your head."

"Put out what?" Mulligan would answer with complete innocence.

"Killing Kropowicz."

"Don't be silly. Who wants to kill Kropowicz?"

"You do. I know you. I can tell you're always thinking about it."

"Ha, ha," Mulligan would laugh richly. "Don't talk nuts. What are you, a mind reader?"

"Your mind I can read, Radford."

One night, the door chimes rang. Radford had been considering filling the furnace with gasoline with the switch off. Call Kropowicz, tell him it wasn't working right. First thing, Kropowicz would test, flick on the switch. Whoosh, no more Kropowicz. House was insured. But would Kropowicz smell the gasoline fumes first? Would he mistake it for fuel oil? Could the odor be disguised? Any after evidence of gasoline . . .

The visitor was a tall, ruddy, uniformed policeman.

"We're looking for information that might help us capture this housebreaker known as the Creeper," he told them, after introducing himself as Sergeant Parish. "You folks seen or heard anything suspicious lately?"

The Mulligans considered, shook their heads.

"Well, we advise keeping your doors and windows locked, especially in the basement. I do; I live in the area myself. We think he might hit this neighborhood soon. Thank you, folks. Just a routine check. Sorry to bother you."

"Officer," Mrs. Mulligan said as he was turning away, "perhaps you can influence my husband not to kill Kropowicz."

"Ma'am?"

"He wants to kill Kropowicz. He thinks about it all the time. Tell him it's against the law. Tell him he can't get away with it. For his own good, tell him to forget about it."

"What are you bothering the officer for, Libby?" Mulligan said. "I ain't killing nobody."

Sergeant Parish looked from one to the other, then whipped out a notebook. "Who is this he's threatened to kill?"

"Nobody," Mulligan said.

"Kropowicz, the plumber," Libby said.

"R. Kropowicz, Plumbing and Heating, Stimson Boulevard?"

"That's right," Mulligan said. "You cops sure know your district."

"It's our business," Parish said. "Why do you want to kill him?"

"Now, officer," Mulligan said patiently, "I never said—"

"Overcharging," Libby said. "Sloppy work. Padding time. Cheating on parts. Unnecessary, over-priced helpers—"

"Freezing all night, what about that?" Mulligan put in. "What about the shattered keel and broken mainmast?"

"You lost me somewhere," Parish said, "but I get the picture. If you're not satisfied with his services, that's a matter for the civil courts, not for killing."

"Exactly," Libby said.

"I never said—" Mulligan began.

"I get the impression," Parish interrupted. "Let me tell you this, Mr. Mulligan. Some things are not for amateurs. Murder is one of them. You'd be up against a professional police department and we'd get you, especially now we have a lead on you. Your wife is a smart woman. Put this out of your head. Stick to your own field, Mr. Mulligan; you are not an expert in crime. We are. We get our man, Mr. Mulligan. Sooner or later, sooner or later . . ."

"Forgive me, Radford," Libby said when they were alone. "I have to stop you someway."

"All right, Libby, all right," Mulligan said absently, already absorbed in another idea. Once his mind was made up, nothing changed it. This might be it, Mulligan was thinking. Get a disguise, rent a little flat, in that seedy Berwick section where people came and went. Use an assumed name. Then call Kropowicz for a plumbing repair, something simple like fixing a washer, where he'd have to come alone. Then it would be just him and Kropowicz, alone, just the two of them. Maybe he'd strangle Kropowicz with his bare hands. Get his hands on Kropowicz's throat . . . Mulligan smiled happily. *Kill. Strangle. Strangle Kropowicz . . .*

"Radford!" cried Mrs. Mulligan.

Some nights later the Mulligans retired early. Outside, the night was dark and nibbling cold, threatening snow, but the house was warm, the oil burner for the time running with steady throatiness. Mulligan, considering the feasibility of rigging up something to electrocute Kropowicz next time he came, something that would appear accidental, soon snored off to sleep. He was awakened once by the sound of police sirens in the distance.

The second time he was awakened it was by Libby's fingers pinching his arm. "Ouch," he said. "What the—"

Libby whispered shakily. "Sounds. In the basement. Someone's there. I have very good ears."

"Nuts. Lemme sleep, will you."

"It's the Creeper," Libby said positively.

"Kipper the Creeper," said Mulligan, turning over.

"I know it's the Creeper," Libby said. "He'll steal the whole house from under us."

"All right, all right," Mulligan said. "If it'll make you feel better . . ."

He left the bed, slipped through the dark house and down the basement stairs. He flicked a switch. Light blazed. He saw him.

Crouched at the wall, the Creeper stood perfectly still; a wisp of a

man dressed all in black. Through the black mask on his face eyes glittered like a cobra's.

"The Creeper!" Mulligan yelled.

He charged. His fist hurtled. The Creeper made a deft move. Mulligan's fist slammed into the wall. The Creeper rapped Mulligan on the chin. Mulligan fell . . .

Mulligan came to on the living-room couch. Libby was hovering anxiously and the room seemed filled with police and detectives. A face painfully unblurred, Sergeant Parish.

"I'm okay, Libby," Mulligan mumbled. "Just my hand hurts."

"You should have phoned the police instead of trying to take him yourself," Parish said severely. "I told you, Mulligan, some things are not for amateurs."

"You didn't get him?"

"He didn't wait around for us. But we always get our man, Mulligan, sooner or later."

Mulligan closed his eyes, then opened them. "You were after something earlier. I heard sirens."

"That was a false alarm," Parish said. "Thought it was the Creeper,

but it was a case of mistaken identity. What you heard was the squad cars and the ambulance after we'd fired the shots. Too bad. It was just a plumber on an emergency call; this fellow, Kropowicz, in fact."

Mulligan abruptly sat up. "Who?"

"R. Kropowicz, Plumbing and Heating."

"Was he hurt?"

"Killed," Parish said. "Shot dead. Terrible. We're in for a strict reprimand now. Trigger-happy cops, they'll call us. Leaves the neighborhood without a plumber, too. Kropowicz did my plumbing, you know. Also did plumbing for some of the other boys on the force."

Mulligan looked into Parish's eyes. He saw something there that made him start.

Parish shook his head sternly. "As I told you, Mulligan, some things are best left to experts."

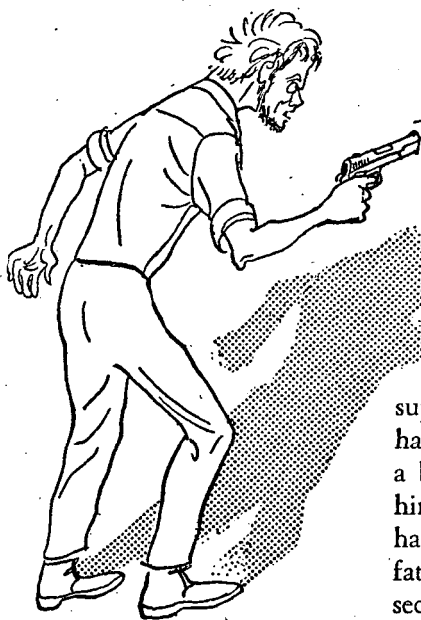
Mulligan could only blink.

"Just leave that Creeper to us," Parish said. "We usually get our man. Sooner or later, Mulligan, sooner or later."



Everyone has his own delusion, and to each is meted suitable reward.

THE FAT MAN should have been able to free himself just by putting his weight on the rope and snapping it, but he was flabby and didn't seem to have the spunk for even that much effort. Then, of course, Mike held the gun. Mike was small,



superficially scraggy, but he was all hard muscle. His lean jaw ended in a beard as unkempt as the rest of him; it looked as though the moths had settled in it. He had tied the fat man's hands behind him, then secured the rope to a heavy iron

A GUN FOR a Kingdom

pipe, forcing him to stand with his back to the wall.

It was different with the girl. She was a puny eleven or twelve, and didn't need to be tied; she was too petrified to run away. She stood bolt upright in the corner, and every few seconds a sob convulsed her frail little body. The tears rolled down her face, but she made no attempt to wipe them away. They fell onto her white cotton blouse, making round marks which grew slowly larger and coalesced to form dark, irregular patterns.

"Who is she?" Mike asked. "She don't look like your kid."

"No, she's my niece, my brother's kid, and when he gets back and finds you here he'll grind you up into little pieces."

"If he's anything like you," Mike said, contemptuously, "I don't have nothing to fear."

The fat man pouted like a child. "What do you want with us? We've done you no harm."

"Oh, you ain't, no? You're one of them, aren't you?"

"One of who?"

"One of them that's against me. Don't you try and tell me you ain't."

"I don't know what you're talk-

ing about. How can I be against you? I've never seen you before."

"You're one of them just the same, one of them rich folks that won't give poor folks like me a chance, and sends 'em to jail when they tries to help themselves."

"Me rich? You don't know what you're talking about."

"This is your cabin, ain't it?"

"No, it belongs to my brother, and you couldn't call him rich either."

"I don't have a brother who owns a cabin. I don't have a brother, even. I don't have nobody except the guys I met in jail."

"Look, I've never met you; I swear I've got nothing against you. Let me go and I promise I won't say a word about what happened here."

Mike shook his head. "Nope. I need you two for hostages."

The fat man's eyes bulged with fear. "Hostages? Hostages for what? For who?"

"Hostages for when the sheriff gets here."

"The sheriff? Who says the sheriff's coming? What have you done to get the sheriff after you?"

For a moment Mike's face softened as though he were about to

by Anthony Marsh

confide his troubles, then his jaw tightened. "Never you mind. You just believe what I say; he's on his way and his whole posse right behind him."

"How does he know you're here?"

"He don't, but he'll trace me. And when he comes he'll see the car; it's stuck right out in front there."

"Why don't you take it and get away before he does come?"

"And run to someplace else and get me a new bunch of hostages? I'll never have it better than I've got it here. Anyway, I'm sick and tired of running. And what do I do when I run out of gas?"

"You can get gas anywhere."

"Without money?" Mike rammed a hand into his pocket and pulled out a dime and two pennies. "How much gas will that get me, as far as the next block?"

"I'll give you money. You can buy enough gas to get you out of the state. Untie me and I'll get you the money."

"I don't have to untie you to get the money," Mike sneered. "I felt your billfold when I tied you up. But it's too late for that, mister. The likes of you should have given me the money before, when I could have made proper use of it."

"But don't you want to get away?"

"Like I said, I'm sick and tired of running. The way I see it, there ain't nowhere to run to, not anymore. I'd still be running when I got there. I been running too long."

"So you're going to stay right here and fight it out with the sheriff. I tell you, boy, you might just as well be committing suicide."

"Don't say that word, dammit." Mike turned suddenly to the little girl, who squeezed herself into her corner. He said, almost meekly, "Excuse me, kid." Then he switched his wrath back to the fat man. "Don't you ever say that. Don't call me a suicide. Don't you know suicide's a sin? Don't you never go to church? Don't you know nothing?"

The fat man backed against the iron pipe. "I'm sorry, mister."

"Mike's the name."

"I'm sorry, Mike. Maybe I didn't judge you right. But you acted real desperate, coming in here with that gun and tying me up. What did you do to get the sheriff after you?"

Mike exploded afresh. "I told you, it's none of your damned business." Then once more to the girl, "Excuse me, kid."

He sat down at the bare wooden table, facing the fat man who was perspiring copiously through his shirt. The girl was behind Mike, and he could hear her regular sobs,

but he paid her little attention. He placed the gun in front of him and leaned forward. "Till the sheriff comes, you and me got some talking to do."

"I'll be glad to talk to you," the fat man said eagerly. "Maybe you need some advice."

"I don't need none of your damned advice. Excuse me, kid. I been getting advice all my life, from my old man before he drank himself to death, from my prissy schoolteacher, the social worker, the probation officer. Put the whole lot together and it don't amount to a heap of beans. A fat lot of good they done me."

"What is it you want, Mike?"

"I jst want you to listen, fatso. Who do you think you are to give me advice? Who says you're holier than me?"

"I never said that."

"But you meant that, didn't you? All you people think you're better than me. Say, what's your racket?"

"I don't have a racket. I'm a cab driver."

Mike laughed coarsely, thrusting the table from him with the force of his mirth. "You're a cabbie, and you say you ain't got a racket. Look, buster, I've met all sorts in jail, cabbies, trumpet players, crooked doctors, you name it. They've all got a racket. Wouldn't you know, my last cellmate was a

cabbie, and he told me plenty about the cabbie racket; they're all in it."

"Well, I've never been in jail in my life," the fat man said hotly.

"No, but I bet you ought to be. Don't tell me you've never fiddled the meter, or shortchanged some drunk, or clipped him an extra ten bucks for finding him a call girl."

The fat man looked genuinely aggrieved. "That's all legit. If an out of town man wants a little bit extra service he expects to pay for it."

Mike ground the back of his hand against his scraggly beard and spat. "Legit service you call it. My, my, what you smart-talking boys can't do with nice words. Me, I got a much worse word for it, one I wouldn't say in front of the kid. And what about all those tips that don't get put down in your income tax; I suppose that's legit, too."

"There may be a few small amounts, but heck, I'm not a book-keeper."

"How much last year?"

"Maybe ten or twenty bucks. I can't count every dime."

Mike jumped up. "My cellmate says you're a liar." He came over to the fat man and jabbed the gun in his side. "My cellmate says it's more like two thousand bucks."

The fat man pulled away till the rope cut deep into his wrists. "I don't know about your cellmate."

Me, I've never made that kind of money."

"Liar!" Mike screwed the gun into the man's ribs till he groaned. "How much? I got to have the truth."

"Could be five hundred," the man gasped.

"What about a thousand?"

"Could be."

"Yeah, could be, and you're not a bookkeeper. I bet you know every cent you've gypped Uncle Sam for. A thousand bucks every year you rob the federal government; and me, I knock off a few hub caps or snatch a radio worth maybe twenty bucks from a store, and what happens to me? Reform school, a year in jail, two years, while you righteous crooks stay on the outside all cosy and carry on with your legit businesses and no one stops you."

He pulled back his gun and returned to the table, leaving the fat man quivering like a mass of wet colorless jelly. The girl was so terrified now she had stopped sobbing entirely. Mike slammed the gun onto the table.

"What's your name, mister?"

"Luke."

Mike guffawed. "Luke. Saint Luke. Tell me, Saint Luke, do you go around among publicans and prostitutes? Do you try reforming them and then set them up in business, legit businesses, with the

money you stole from the drunk pleasure gents and the federal government?"

Luke would not answer, and Mike went on. "You think I'm all rotten, don't you? Well, let me tell you, you're wrong. I tried to go straight, real straight, even with what they done to me, and last night I nearly had it made. I hadn't broken probation in six months, and that probation officer sitting on my head all the time like a hot ice pack. With my record I couldn't get regular work, but I got odd jobs, enough to keep me off the street. Then nothing for three weeks, no one would give me a break. Yesterday was Sunday, no point in looking for work on a Sunday; I had nothing left except for twelve cents and this gun, and you know, I'd never used the gun; I'd never used a gun at all. I reckon if a man was standing more than five yards away from me I'd miss him by six yards. So all I had was twelve cents and a gun I'd never used. What would you have done if you'd have been me, Mister Saint Luke?"

Luke's mouth quivered but nothing came out.

Mike came close up to him, blowing down into his beard. "I know what you'd have done. You'd have held up some guy for a thousand bucks, but not me. You know

what I did? I was walking along the street there, and I saw a lot of folks all dressed up nice going into a church. So I went in with them. I went to church without nobody making me go, Mister Saint Luke. You didn't think I'd do that, did you?"

"Why not? You're as good as the other people," Luke stammered humbly.

"You're a damned liar. Excuse me, kid. Well, you say what you like, I went into that church, and I sat there with all those nice-looking folks, and I listened to the hymns and them singing, and it was beautiful, and I could feel myself getting religion. It made me all warm and tingling inside my chest. Then the preacher got up and started to preach, and he spoke beautiful, and he gave me more religion, and it tingled so hard round my heart I thought it was going to stop beating. He went on and on about how good the Lord is to us, and how we was all his children, even the sinners right inside that church, and how if we repented our sins we'd be cleaned like a new-born lamb and all go marching into the Kingdom of Heaven. There was only two things we had to do; to repent our sins and to support the church. And when he finished they passed around a plate made of solid silver, and everyone put

money into it; not the jingly stuff but greenbacks, and not too many singletons, neither.

"When they came to me, all I had was my twelve cents and my gun and I couldn't put them into the plate, so I pretended to be thinking spiritual and they passed me by; maybe I didn't look so good to them. But I knew I couldn't get into the Kingdom of Heaven that night, and I wanted to like crazy. I still had my room. I went back there but I didn't eat nothing. I could have got a cup of coffee or something for my twelve cents, but I didn't feel like eating. I just dropped onto the bed with my clothes on and fell asleep, and I dreamed all night long about marching into the Kingdom of Heaven with the saints.

"This morning I waited for the pawnshop to open, then I went in and asked the man how much he'd give me for the gun, seeing as I didn't aim to use it. He looked at me queer and pointed to a glass case stuck up on the wall. It was full of guns.

"'Look, son,' he says, 'I've got more guns up there than I'll ever be able to sell. Everybody wants to hock guns. Looks like they're trying to set me up in the armaments business.'

"'I don't want to hock it,' I says. 'I want to sell it. I'll take fifty bucks

for it. Now there's a real good deal.'

"He laughed right in my face. 'What you want fifty bucks for, to invest? That gun there will earn you more.'

"No,' I says, 'I want that cash to help me get into the Kingdom of Heaven.'

"You some sort of a nut?' he says.

"No, honest, mister,' I says. 'I got religion, and I need the money bad for my religion.'

"Look,' he says, 'I couldn't sell that gun for fifty bucks; I couldn't get five for it.'

"I went over and looked in the showcase and saw a gun exactly like mine that was marked sixty-five bucks. I reckoned the man had to make a profit, so I says, 'I'll take thirty bucks for it.'

"Look,' he says, 'I haven't got room for one more gun. I've got my business to attend to, young man, so will you please stop bothering me.'

"I know who you are,' I says.

"He looks at me very suspicious. 'Who?'

"You're one of them that's against me.'

"You're darned right,' he says. 'I've got no time for your sort. Now get out.'

"Then he turns his back on me just like I wasn't there, like I was a rotten piece of nothing; it got

me so mad I forgot all about my religion. Like I said, I could miss a man at five yards, but there he was on the other side of the counter with his back to me, and I let him have it right in the middle. He gave a sort of scream and fell down. When I looked over the counter there was blood pumping from his mouth; made me sick looking at it. After a minute it stopped, and he didn't move no more.

"I ran out into the street, and there was a lot of people out there who had heard the shot. When they saw me come out holding the gun they all ran the other way. So I cut across the street to the supermarket, and I walked through it calm, like I was looking for something to buy, and came out at the back onto the parking lot. There was nobody after me then, but I knew I had to get away. I looked around and I was lucky; there was an old lady in a big convertible, just starting to back out. I ran over to her.

"Excuse me, ma'am,' I says, 'but could I borrow your car for an important emergency?' I always try to be polite to ladies, but she wasn't polite back to me; she didn't even ask me what the emergency was.

"Certainly not, young man. Get away,' she says.

"'I only want to borrow it,' I says. 'You'll get it back when I'm through with it.'

"'If you don't get away,' she says, 'I'll call for help.'

"'I know who you are,' I says.

"'Who?' she says.

"'One of them that's against me,' I told her.

"She didn't answer, but started to back up. She can't go fast backwards, so I walks along with her. I was going to give her another chance when I sees a man coming out of the back door of the market who'd seen me running out of the pawnshop. I was glad the old woman had her face turned the other way from me when I did it; it made an awful mess of her head. I opened the car door, and the old lady fell out. The man had run back into the market. There was blood all over the car seat; it got onto my clothes, look."

Mike pulled up the skirt of his jacket to show the thick dark crusts which still clung to it. Luke shuddered, and the girl gave a whining moan. Mike went on.

"It's a funny thing. There was all sorts of people coming and going on that parking lot, but no one tried to stop me. They let me back the car out, and I drove like the devil was behind me. I reckon he was; it was a rotten thing I'd done to the old lady, even if she was

against me. They didn't catch up with me all through town, and when I got onto the highway I put my foot down hard on the pedal, real hard, and you ought to have seen me go. That was a pretty gutsy car the old lady had left me.

"I'd gone nearly forty miles when this highway patrol man comes screaming after me with all his sirens blowing and his red lights popping. I'd tried like crazy to get away from him, but I'm not a good driver really, especially when I'm panicked like I was then. I weaved about for a bit, then he had me pinned up against the side of the road and I had to stop. He came and stood over me, all wild and fuming.

"'Can I see your license, driver?' he says.

"I pretended to reach for my license, but I brought out the gun instead and shot him in the chest. Afterwards I realized I needn't have done this; he probably didn't know who I was; he was just going to give me a ticket for speeding, else he wouldn't have bothered asking for my license.

"I don't know if I killed him; at least, he didn't die right away. I pushed my foot down on that pedal, and he started shooting after me. I heard a couple of bullets hit into the back of the car, and I didn't look behind me. Anyway, Mis-

ter Saint Luke, here I am now, and here you are, and are you going to tell me the sheriff ain't going to come tailing after me here?"

Luke was numb with fear now. He had no desire to speak, but Mike prodded him.

"What would you do if you was in my place, Mister Luke? What would you do if you was me?"

"I'd shoot myself and get it over with," Luke managed to mutter.

"Don't say that," Mike screamed. "Don't say suicide to me. It's a mortal sin. That's what the preacher said. It's a mortal sin for a man to take his own life."

His head jerked sharply to the window as a car came to a sudden stop outside, followed shortly by a second car. The first carried the sheriff's markings. Several men got out of each car, some armed with rifles. The leading man, obviously the sheriff, pointed to the parked convertible; they crowded around examining it.

Mike swiveled about to face the girl. "I ain't asked you your name yet, kiddo. It ain't Mary by any chance?"

She shook her head miserably.

"That's a pity. What is your name? Tell me, kid, is it Annabella, Frances? Maybe it's Pat."

"Grace," she blurted out with a fresh sob.

Mike saw the sheriff excitedly

pointing out the bullet holes in the back of the convertible. In one movement the whole group looked up at the cabin, then made a dash for the cover of their cars. Mike could see them through the window quite clearly, but he knew they could not penetrate into the shadows of the room. It occurred to him that they could not even be sure he was inside, and this was confirmed when two men broke away from the group and ran up the road, their heads lowered and their eyes scanning the adjoining empty lot for a place where a man might take cover.

With strange nonchalance Mike turned his attention back to the girl. "Grace, that's a good name. It means without sin. That's what the preacher said. It means you ain't got no sins at all."

His voice became firmer and more resonant in imitation of the preacher. "But you must have some sins, my child. All of us mortals is born in sin."

Again she shook her head, terrified and confused.

The two scouts returned, shrugging to show they had drawn a blank, and the whole group went into conference behind the cars.

Mike could see a hat rise occasionally above the roofs. He looked sternly at the girl. "You gotta tell me the truth. For instance, what

you get up to when you're with your boyfriend? Anything sinful?"

"I don't have a boyfriend," she whimpered.

"That figures," he said in a fatherly way, caressing his beard. "You're only a midge after all."

The sheriff appeared to have made a decision. He left the cover of the cars, revolver drawn, and

cautiously approached the low hedge on the front line of the property. Only one of his men followed, carrying a rifle. Mike went over to the girl and tried to pick her up. This was difficult because she went limp at his touch, but he clasped her arms rigidly against her sides and, holding her like a wooden statue in front of him, carried



her to the window. He rammed his boot through the glass, and it shattered onto the floorboards of the veranda outside. The sheriff and his man stopped dead at the hedge. They were thirty feet from the cabin, and there wasn't a scrap of cover.

"If you try to get in here you're going to have to shoot your way through the girl," Mike shouted at the top of his voice.

The sheriff, a big man, stood his ground and stared hard at Mike, trying to get a view of his face above the girl's shoulder. His voice boomed out. "You know we've got to get you for what you've done. I advise you to make it easy for yourself and come quietly. You'll be given a fair trial."

Mike dropped to his knees, so that the girl now stood in front of him, and fired a shot at the sheriff. It went wide, but the two men retreated hurriedly to the cover of the cars.

Mike carried the girl back to her corner where she collapsed like a rag doll, supporting herself against the wall, her legs stuck straight out in front of her and her head drooping forward over her blouse, now damp from the tears. She made no movement except to breathe.

Mike lifted her chin gently. "You sure you ain't never sinned, kiddo? You ain't never stole nothing, like

hub caps or a carton of cigarettes?"

She uttered a shrill sob, and her whole body shook. "Once I took some cookies out of the cookie jar."

He smiled benignly. "That the worst you done?"

She nodded against his hand while her jaw continued to tremble.

"I don't reckon that's a great sin," he said. "I used to take cookies out of the jar when I was a kid. My pa knew about it, but that was one thing he never whipped me for. I guess he reckoned it was natural for kids to take cookies out of the jar. But he whipped me for darned near everything else, including a whole lot of things I never did do at all."

The conference was going on in real earnest now; not even a head showed above the tops of the cars. Suddenly two men broke away and dashed down the road; a few seconds later two more men scurried in the opposite direction.

"I reckon they're gonna try getting in from the back," Mike said philosophically. "That don't leave us too much time, do it, Mister Saint Luke?"

"Look," said the fat man, "I'll make a deal with you. Why don't you untie me and let me go out and talk to the boys out there? I've got a lot of influence with the sheriff; I'll see he makes it easy for

you. Believe me, he'll go easy."

Mike ostentatiously pushed the gun to the middle of the table and walked around, pushing his face close up to Luke's. "You mean you're gonna leave the kid here alone with me, a crazy man?"

"Well, she can't talk; she's lost her tongue, and she's got no pull with the sheriff."

Mike regarded him with concentrated contempt. "And exactly what you gonna tell your old buddy-buddy, the sheriff?"

"I'll tell him you didn't harm us, and how you treated us nice, and how you got religion, and how you tried to go straight, and how you didn't really mean to do those things you did with that gun."

Mike's head dipped with each point in Luke's recital. "And after that, you gonna tell those things to the judge and the jury and the man who pulls the switch on the chair? You got influence with them, too?"

Luke tried to draw away, but Mike stayed close against him, panting as if he had just run a race, peering into Luke's eyes as if he were trying to penetrate into the soul that lay behind them. Suddenly he cocked his ears. "Those boys must be somewheres near the back of the place by now. It's time for you and me to do a bit of repenting, Mister Luke. Do

you repent all the sins you've done?"

"Course I do," Luke screamed. "I'm a God-fearing man, just like you are."

"Do you repent all the times you finagled the meter; all the times you shortchanged a drunk; all the times you sold a piece of feminine flesh for a ten spot; all the thousands of dollars you robbed Uncle Sam?"

"Yes. Yes. I repent."

"Amen. I'm happy for you," Mike said. "And I repent, too. I repent for all the hub caps I stole, and for all the radios I snatched, and for all the cartons of cigarettes, and for killing the pawnbroker and the poor old lady, and the patrol man, if I did kill him. I repent of all my sins. Oh, yes, I repent."

Mike snatched the gun from the table. "The Lord tells me it's time to go now." Feverishly he unhitched the rope from the iron pipe, and when the rope was free he wound it round his left wrist, stuck the gun hard into Luke's back and drove him toward the door like a yoked ox. He made the fat man stand with his face to the wall while he undid the latch, then he drove him out onto the veranda keeping him all the time in front of him, a massive shield against the sheriff's armament.

The sheriff's voice boomed over

the top of his car. "It isn't going to do you any good. You know we've got to get you eventually. You might as well let him go."

"And supposing I don't?"

The sheriff did not answer, and Mike chuckled into Luke's ear. "He can't do nothing. He don't know about you and me getting religion and how we're booked for the Kingdom of Heaven. Let's show him, you and me both, eh? Let's sing a hymn for him. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" he sang out in a high-pitched voice.

"Come on, Saint Luke. Show 'em as how you've got religion, too. Sing up." He jabbed the gun like a goad into the soft flesh in front of him.

Luke managed to croak out a hallelujah.

"That's better. Hallelujah! Halle-

lujah!" Mike sang with ecstatic fervor.

The fat man croaked again, and for half a dozen bars they kept up their grating, tuneless duet. Then Luke went mad; he lunged forward and tried to bolt, but the rope merely tightened on Mike's wrist. Mike jerked him back, and the gun in his other hand exploded, shattering Luke's chest. The fat body folded in the middle and toppled forward, leaving Mike poised alone on the veranda, screaming a wild solo hallelujah.

The first bullet cut into the side of his neck, cutting short his song. Behind him in the cabin was the sound of thumping boots and the girl's hysterical screams. Then he heard nothing more as the second bullet caught him right between the eyes.

~~~~~  
*Dear Fans:*

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*I want to thank all of you for your interest.*

*Most sincerely,*

*Pat Hitchcock*

Could it be only gibberish,  
When doubled the 'vigorish',  
There are more fish for the g(l)ibberish?



# IMAGES / ZHJAMI



By Michael  
Brett

AT NINE I opened my eyes, blinking into sunlight; for fifteen minutes I lay in bed, waking slowly, planning the day. I'm not one of those guys who springs out of bed, ready to jump into the heat of battle without a second thought. That routine isn't for me.

My work requires an alert mind. If I move too quickly, without thought, I can get myself killed. Most jobs aren't that hazardous, but when you swim in the midst of a shark pack you'd better know what

you and the fish both are doing.

Five hours isn't enough sleep for anyone, but Ingrid, that tall, curved, haughty blonde that I'd been with last night had more than compensated for any loss of sleep; a fancy dame, that one, with a Sutton Place address. She helped my image. I'd taken her to a fine res-

taurant, a play, and then we'd traveled the pubs until I'd dropped her off, fractured, at her place and went home myself. We're opposites. She's a classy dame with a college background, a society dame with poise. That's what I like in a babe, class and poise.

The way it is for her, she likes a free-spending, late-night, man-about-town guy. She lives for kicks. Maybe she thinks going out with a guy that the cops keep an eye on is one of them. To each his own; maybe she thinks it's doing her image some good.

I climbed out of bed, walked across thick carpeting and looked out at Central Park. It was summer and, for New York, the day was remarkably clear and dry. It was going to be a good day. It always is when you wake up and you've already been paid five thousand dollars for the day's work that lies ahead of you.

I showered a long time, then I shaved while my coffee perked in the kitchen. I dressed, prepared breakfast, set it on the table and ate slowly. I always eat breakfast at home because I don't like the clatter of dishes and the shouts of short-order cooks and waitresses. My surroundings have to be neat and quiet and orderly in the morning and without distraction, because when the day starts I'm al-

ready at work, thinking, planning.

When I finished my breakfast, the doorbell rang. There were two men at the door, and when it comes to cops I've got no trouble recognizing them. The taller one was a burly, thick-necked man in a rumpled brown suit. The shorter one was thin, with a pinched angry face. The taller one flashed his badge and said, "I'm Detective Walsh." His partner said, "I'm Beck." Walsh said; "Mr. Orange?"

"Yes," I said.

"We'd like to talk to you," he said pleasantly.

*A nice, polite cop*, I thought, only he wasn't fooling me. I stood aside, they stepped into the room and I shut the door after them.

"Mr. Orange," said Walsh, "I wonder if you could tell us where you spent Friday night, two weeks ago, say between nine and twelve."

His question was not unexpected. I nodded and scratched my chin thoughtfully. "Between nine and twelve. Nine and twelve. Offhand I just can't remember. Why do you want to know?"

"Try to remember," said Beck. "Take your time."

"No, I don't think so," I said. "Who can remember something that happened two weeks ago?"

"You've got a short memory," Beck said. "On that Friday, be-

tween nine and twelve you were in Leclerc's restaurant, sitting in a rear booth with Oscar Middleton."

"Yes, I remember; that sounds about right, Oscar Middleton, Friday night between nine and twelve. Okay, I was talking to a guy in a restaurant. What's this all about?"

"You were the last person who saw him. He never went home and he's been missing ever since. His wife called it in."

"I don't know where he went after he left," I said. "All we did was have a couple drinks. He said good night and that was that."

"What was the purpose of the meeting?" said Beck. "What did you talk about?"

"We're friends. What do friends talk about? His business, his family, health, things like that."

"How was his business?" Walsh asked.

"He said it was all right. He wasn't complaining about it."

"He should have," Walsh said. "He was playing the stock market short, prices went up and he's in the hole for thousands."

"He told me about that," I said.

"He had to make the money good so he went to the loan sharks and borrowed thirty thousand dollars. He made a few payments, then he defaulted for a couple months and the sharks boosted that thirty grand to forty-seven grand and

they doubled the vigorish. In no time at all, it was all he could do to pay just the interest. He defaulted on paying the interest, and all of a sudden the principal on the loan has been boosted to ninety-eight thousand. He's no longer a free man, people own him. He disappears. Where do you think he is, Mr. Orange?"

"No idea," I said. "How do you know all this about him?"

"From his wife. She's worried sick." Walsh lit an inexpensive cigar. "What do you do for a living, Mr. Orange?"

"I'm in ranching; horses, you know."

"Where?"

"South America."

"Yeah, South America," Walsh said sourly. "Empty your pockets, turn them all inside out and dump the contents of your wallet on the table."

"You guys don't have the right to do this."

"I know," Walsh said calmly. He waited, then he pointed to the stack of bills that had come from my wallet. "Count them."

When I'd finished, he nodded. "Five thousand dollars in your pocket like cigarette money, and you don't have any visible means of support."

"A ranch in South America," I said. "I'm also considering Aus-

tralia and Africa, among others."

"We could take you down and book you on suspicion of murder," Beck said quietly. "We can throw you in the can for that."

"How long could you keep me there? Who's been murdered?"

"Take a look around," Walsh said to Beck.

"Do you have a warrant?" I said.

"Do we need one?" asked Walsh.

"No, go ahead. Only don't get my clothes messed up."

Walsh looked at me and nodded.

"Look, just for the record," Walsh said with a pained look, "we don't know all there is to know about you. You're kind of a mystery man. We keep picking up little bits here and there. Last year in California you were arrested for suspicion of murder, the same thing in Michigan the year before that."

"I didn't murder anybody."

"Maybe, but you always wind up as the last guy who's been seen with the victim."

"It could be coincidental, Walsh."

"Never in a million years. Not when it happens three times with three different guys who just disappear. I don't buy it."

"It could happen like that," I said. "It's possible."

"Sure," said Walsh, skeptically.

"And maybe you can also explain how these three guys all happened to be into the loan sharks for real

heavy loot, and how all three guys couldn't come up with their payments, and all three of them disappeared after they were last seen talking to you. You're a smart guy. You're walking around with five grand in your pocket and living in a nice place like this. You ought to be able to explain it to me."

"Not me."

"All right, then I'll explain it to you. Here's the way it figures: you're working for the loan



sharks; you're a collector or an enforcer."

"Wrong both times," I said.

Walsh grinned. "Maybe you're just an imported killer."

Beck came out of my bedroom shaking his head. "Nothing," he said to Walsh. "He's got some wardrobe, though. The ranching business must be pretty good," he said sarcastically. Beck motioned to Walsh and started to walk out.

Walsh stayed where he was. "Let me tell you something. I've known guys like you for years. I've seen them come and go. Guys like you, you live around the fringes, just outside the law. Guys like you, you don't even have a record, but we know who you are and sooner or later we square the books."

I said, "Gentlemen, if you're through, I have a business appointment this morning."

Walsh wasn't in any hurry to leave. "The trouble with you is that you underestimate us. For instance, we keep an eye on known criminals and we find that you visit them."

"What are you getting at, Walsh?" I asked.

"You're working for them," said Walsh, and his voice was raised, angry.

"Wrong again, Inspector. I stopped working for other people when I was sixteen. I work for my-

self. I enjoy my independence."

"You think you're a big shot. You're only a wise guy. You're mixed up in the murder of three people. You think you're a big shot, because you're working for loan sharks. Sooner or later they're going to work somebody over and somebody's going to talk. We'll know where to find you when he does." He was beginning to get worked up.

"Okay," I said. I waited until they'd gone, then took the elevator down to the street level. Beck was sitting across the street on a park bench, hiding behind a newspaper. I couldn't see Walsh but I knew he was around somewhere.

I walked to a public pay phone half a block away, closed the door, dropped change into the coin slot and dialed. A woman's voice answered, "Third County Investors."

I said, "Mr. Drayton, please."

"Who's calling?"

"His cousin," I said. I gave her the number on the dial and hung up, then waited for the phone to ring. I could visualize the scene at the other end of the line, the girl at the desk bringing the number I'd given her into Drayton's office.

Today, the Third County Investors Company are financial backers for the builders of giant shopping centers, hotels, apartment houses and many other business ventures,

but it had all started with loan sharking, which still constitutes more than fifty-five percent of their business. When it runs like that, people get nervous about phones being tapped. Drayton would make his call from a public phone in the lobby of the building.

The phone next to me rang and I grabbed it.

"Okay, cousin," said Drayton. "What's up?"

"The job is scheduled for today, but there are complications. I just had two cops drop in at my place. Now I'm downstairs in the phone booth and it might be better to let the job go for a while."

"Listen, cousin, you got five thousand yesterday, in advance, for a job. The word's out that Bunson made a monkey out of the company. Other people hear that this guy beat us for over a hundred grand and they get ideas, so we don't let that happen. All right, you know where this guy is holed up. Put the blocks to him." He paused. "Okay, if you feel that the cops are going to get in your way, then a day isn't going to matter. I can square that with the company. They can wait a day or two."

"I'll see," I said, and hung up.

I waved down a cab and when we took off I could see Walsh and Beck in another cab. My destination was a shabby hotel where

Bunson had been holed up for the last eight days. Bunson was a compulsive gambler with a weakness for dice, and at a floating crap game one night he was a heavy loser. He borrowed money from the loan sharks at a six for five rate of interest, payable within a week from the time of the loan. He borrowed more money elsewhere to repay the first loan, and repeated the process when the second loan became due. In three months he was into the loan sharks for over a hundred thousand dollars. I had been hired to kill him.

The cab containing Walsh and Beck stopped half a block away when I went into the old hotel. I knew Bunson's room number, but I asked the man at the desk for it anyway. It would make things easier for Walsh and Beck. Then I took the elevator up, walked down a corridor and knocked on the door.

Bunson called, "Who is it?" When I identified myself he opened the door. He was a tall, thin man in his early fifties. He paced nervously. "They've been rough on my wife, Orange. They gave her abuse over the telephone."

"Well, she expected it, didn't she?" I said. "I warned you that might happen."

"Yes, you did. I want to get out of here and I want to get out of



here now." He went to the dresser, opened the middle drawer, brought out a thick envelope. "You asked for twenty thousand. It's all here."

"Put it back where you got it from, for the time being. We may be interrupted by cops."

He paled, and put the money away. "I don't want cops. Going to them for protection wouldn't work. I made a deal with you, Orange."

"You've got it. The cops were something I hadn't counted on. They followed me here and they're probably standing outside your door right now. I don't worry about cops. If they knock on the door, we'll let them in and we'll talk to them. All I'm doing is visiting a friend. Maybe they won't even bother us. For now let's talk it through, so I know that you understand what you and your wife will have to do."

"Okay, my wife calls the police in two weeks and reports me missing. Meanwhile, you've supplied me with a phony passport and sneaked me off to South America under an assumed name. Then my wife waits for four months before flying down to join me."

"That's right," I said. "You left

a few things out. You don't get in touch with her, and I'm the one who contacts her and gets her out of the country. Is that clear?"

"Yes." He regarded me thoughtfully. "I've never worked on a ranch before. I hope I can do the work."

I said, "Think of the alternative, like bullets in the head, and suddenly ranching in South America becomes easy."

Bunson cast his eyes about the room, let them rest on the door, then regarded me. "I don't like the idea of the police. What I don't understand is why they don't worry you."

I winked. "Cops can't do me any harm. They think I'm a killer for the loan sharks. Cops, by hounding me, improve my image with the sharks, who also think I'm a killer. I get a lot of work because of it." I laughed. "I've got lots of help on my ranch. I admit, I don't pay too well, but think of all the sun and air and scenery."

"You take big chances," Bunson said thoughtfully.

"Calculated risks," I said. "But they'd be much bigger if I killed people."



*A famous art critic claims it takes a lifetime to learn to "see"; perhaps the same is true of hearing.*

# A Hearing Aid for Carmody



by Stephen  
Wasylyk

**S**TANDING at the bank counter, Carmody tried to keep his face blank as he stared at the hard-eyed man pointing the automatic at him. Waving a shotgun, the tough man's partner herded the four bank employees and two customers into a corner at the rear. Carmody moved to follow.

"Not you," said the first man,

and he tossed a brown leather bag at Carmody. "Fill it."

Carmody started in the open vault, stacking the currency neatly into the bag with steady hands, finishing the job by cleaning out the tellers' cages while the other man watched. Carmody closed the bag and held it out.

"Keep it," the hard-eyed man ordered. "You can be our porter." He motioned his partner to begin backing out. "If you people want this man to stay alive, be very slow about pushing any alarm buttons."

It was all very smooth and very professional, even the transfer to another car only a few blocks from the bank, but Carmody knew this wasn't the first time for these two and they should be good at it. The papers had carried the stories of four previous robberies, all worked the same way: hitting a small branch suburban bank shortly before closing time; the bank always convenient to one of the limited access, high-speed highways that ringed the city; the two always taking a hostage which prevented the police from following too closely or setting up roadblocks, and making stakeout teams helpless. Since no one had yet had the nerve to test the pair's threat to kill the hostage, they had been successful so far, and the hostages had always turned up the next morning, un-

harmd, but so thoroughly frightened they were of little help. Their descriptions of the two were never quite the same, except that one was big and crew-cut, the other shorter with cold, pale blue eyes, and they both wore some sort of theatrical makeup. After four robberies, neither the police nor the FBI, as yet, had anything to work on.

Carmody leaned back and waited for the next step. The crew-cut man drove, his big hands twisting the wheel expertly as he wove in and out of traffic at a steady sixty-five on the eastbound expressway. The hard-eyed man held the automatic pressed to Carmody's side. Both men were wearing thin rubber masks that gave their faces a stiff artificial look, and Carmody wondered if his would be the fifth description or match any of the previous four.

"You're a cool one, Jack," the man with the gun said admiringly. "You never blinked an eye in that bank."

Carmody shrugged. "It's only money. Incidentally, my name is Frank, not Jack."

The man chuckled. "You hear that? He says it's only money."

The driver spoke over his shoulder. "We sticking to the plan?"

"Any reason to change?"

The driver jerked his head. "Him. We figured to take along

some scared rabbit, as usual, but he's no scared rabbit. You notice we stirred up no action this time? Before, there was always someone after us, maybe we ran into a road-block. Nothing like that today. Something else, too. You remember in that bank, the way he acted, the way he moved? He practically invited himself into the picture. He didn't try to hide, the way most of them do."

The gun jabbed against Carmody's ribs. "Let's see your wallet. Move real slow."

Carmody shifted, pulled the wallet from his hip pocket and handed it to him.

He flipped the wallet open. "Frank Carmody on the driver's license. Not much else in here. Owner's card for a '65 Ford, men's store charge card and twenty-seven in cash. Looks clean to me. What do you do for a living, Frank?"

"Work in an office," said Carmody, which was partly true.

"What do you think now?" the gunman asked the driver.

"Still think something's funny. If he was a cop, do you think he'd be carrying his badge? I say get rid of him real quick."

"Too soon. Besides, why would a cop want us to take him along? What's he going to do? Without his gun, he's just another citizen liable to get killed if they try to

stop us. Could be even better if he is a cop. He can't hurt us. Keep driving."

"I say dump him."

The hard-eyed man asked solemnly, "You a cop, Frank?"

"Sure," said Carmody. "You're under arrest. Pull over to the side of the road."

They both laughed, and the shorter man said, "You're the coolest, Frank. Why so?"

Carmody saw no reason to explain. "Let's say I've seen the elephant and heard the owl and I just don't give a damn anymore."

"What's that mean?"

"Just that." His voice was tight and hard. "You want to let me out, fine. You want to pull that trigger, go ahead."

The driver turned his head for a quick, startled look. "He's a nut."

"You a nut, Frank?"

"Sure," said Carmody. "A Grade A goober."

They both thought that hilarious. "We ought to keep you around for laughs," said the hard-eyed man.

"You couldn't do that," said Carmody. "Living in those false faces would be too uncomfortable."

"You'd turn us in?" The man with the gun pretended to be hurt. "After all, Frank, we've been nice to you."

"Be nicer," said Carmody, testing him. He kicked the bag holding

the money. "I could use some of this. Say a couple of thousand. You have enough so that you would never miss it."

"Dammit, Frank, you're the coolest I ever met. Right, Harry?"

Carmody filed the name away in his memory.

"He has guts," said Harry. "I told you he was no scared rabbit. Those other hostages would have paid us to let them go. He wants a piece of the action."

"I'm earning it," said Carmody. "I'm keeping the cops off your back. You give a waitress a tip, and she's only doing her job. I'm doing a lot more for you."

"Frank boy, you're not helping us out of the goodness of your heart. You're doing it because you got no choice." The man jabbed Carmody in the ribs with the gun. "We're already paying you by not killing you."

They rolled past a hillside cemetery, polished marble headstones reflecting the sinking sun in a stuttering glimmer; and the idea hit Carmody and refused to be put aside until he accepted it; and accepting it, he felt the month-old anger inside begin to fade.

"I'll have a choice later," said Carmody quietly.

"Frank," said the gunman, "you can't hurt us later, either."

Carmody folded his arms, erased

a moment of doubt, and committed himself. "Don't count on it. Those other hostages didn't look. I did. Take the car. Probably stolen, but it's this year's model, metallic blue, four door, long scratch down the left side, dented cover on the left rear wheel, slight chip on top of the molding of the right front door, cigarette lighter missing, upholstery on the back of the front seat has a slight tear at the bottom on the driver's side, plate number AF11742. You think those masks mean everything? They don't cover your necks. You're both tanned, and you don't find many like that around here at this time of the year so you spend a lot of time down south. The driver gave himself a quick hair dye job, so he's probably blonde or gray; from the wrinkles in his neck I'd say he was gray, maybe in his late fifties. He's two inches taller than I am, which makes him six feet, weighs a good twenty pounds more, which makes him close to two hundred. He has a small scar behind his right ear where the hair won't grow. His hands are big and his little finger was probably broken at one time because it's crooked. Now take you—"

"Give old Sharp Eyes a medal," interrupted Harry. "Now what? I knew this guy was bad news the minute I looked at him. We let him

go and the cops will have our names and descriptions out by morning."

"You put your foot in it, Frank, you know that?" The hard-eyed man shook his head. "Here we could have had a nice ride together and parted friends but you spoiled everything."

"Money talks," said Carmody, trying to box them in. "I can be bought."

"But can you be trusted? We don't know you."

"Take your choice," said Carmody. "Pay up or I give it to them word for word."

"You've given us two choices. What about the third?"

The cemetery they had passed popped up in Carmody's mind.

"Didn't know there was one," he said innocently.

"There always is, Frank. A guy like you should know that." He jabbed the gun harder against Carmody's ribs. "We can get rid of you."

"You'd better give that a lot of thought first," said Carmody drily. "Murder is a lot different than what you've been doing."

"Not so different," said Harry. "First they have to find you, then they have to prove it."

"He's right," agreed the other man. "We're already tagged for armed robbery and kidnapping. If we let you run loose they have us for that, but if we don't we stand a chance of getting clear of everything." He leaned forward. "Take



the next exit, Harry," he ordered.

They swung down an exit ramp, picked up a two-lane blacktop and headed north into The Barrens. Flat, sandy, growing nothing but scraggly pine and weeds, civilization had passed it by except for a few roads that sliced through, an occasional two-pump gas station and some ramshackle houses. If you wanted to hide out or get rid of a body, The Barrens was a better place than most.

"You married, Frank?" asked the hard-eyed man.

"I was," said Carmody shortly. "My wife died."

"Too bad. How long ago?"

"Last month." It could have been yesterday, or a year ago. Time had stopped that night in the hospital and Carmody felt the slow anger return.

"Nobody to cry for you if you don't get back?" The sun had set and the interior of the car was cold.

"Not one tear," said Carmody. "You're definitely not going to cut me in, is that it?"

"That's it, Frank. A man cool enough to try to hold us up while a gun is in his ribs is too cool for his own good. You make me feel you've got ice water in your veins, a heart like a rock and a machine for a head. Depending on a guy like that when he's out of my sight

doesn't make me one bit happy."

It had been easier than Carmody thought. "I didn't intend to make you happy," he said.

"With a gun in your side, you should have," said Harry, spinning the wheel to send the car up a pair of faint ruts in the sand until they ended a good half-mile in from the road. The light was fading and it was dim under the trees. "Out," he said.

Carmody kicked at the loose sand. "Easy to scrape a grave out of this. Doesn't look like anyone will ever find me."

"You really *don't* give a damn, do you?" said Harry.

"Some people are like that," said Carmody. "You've just never run into one until now."

"So you're just going to stand and take it?" asked Harry, contempt in his voice.

Carmody pivoted to face him, coming up on the balls of his feet and flexing his knees, hands half raised. "Guess again. I said I didn't care. I didn't say I was going to make it easy for you."

Harry had left the shotgun in the car, a situation he remedied quickly by producing a short-barrelled revolver. "Here and now," he said.

"Watch yourself," said the other man sharply. "You can't make a mistake with a guy like this."

"Then let's get it over with."

"You want to drag almost two hundred pounds of dead weight into the trees?" asked the hard-eyed man sarcastically. "Make him walk."

"I don't feel like walking," said Carmody, stalling for time.

The shorter man sighed. "I like you, Frank, so don't make me shoot you in a place you won't like. Move."

Carmody walked slowly into the pines, eyes moving from side to side, looking for some way to delay them, to manage a postponement.

"Hold it, Frank," the tough man ordered. "This is far enough."

Carmody watched them narrowly, waiting for one or the other to move first. Harry was to his left, the hard-eyed man to his right, separated just enough and standing back so that he couldn't get to one or the other before being hit. They were professionals at this, too. Not testing them when they had the other hostages had been no mistake.

"You know, Frank, I finally figured you," said the hard-eyed man. "You could have kept your mouth shut in the car. You gave us that description routine so we couldn't afford to let you go. You're using us."

"Spell it out, Kaz," said Harry. Carmody had two names now, if

he ever had the chance to use them.

"His wife," said Kaz. "She's dead and he doesn't see much sense in living. He's not the type to knock himself off, so he set us up to do it."

Harry stared at Carmody. "I told you he was a nut but if that's what he wants, he picked a sure way to get it. We can't let him talk. The cops would pin us down in an hour."

The other man shook his head regretfully. "You're too good a man for this, Frank; but we have no choice. You're a fool. You could have walked away free and clear. There's always another woman someplace."

Kaz was a lot smarter than Carmody supposed him to be, but he was wrong. There would never be another like her, ever again; none other so precisely right for Carmody. A slender, will-o'-the-wisp woman with a gamin's face and a voice like the whisper of wind in the trees, filled with promise and laughter and warmth and tenderness, she had seen through the Carmody everyone knew and found the real Carmody, and had made time move quickly, too quickly. No one could take her place.

"You like this spot?" asked Harry.



Carmody looked around. "What happens if I say no?"

Harry's mask moved as he smiled. "You get outvoted."

How long now? Carmody wondered if it would be one minute, two minutes— and if that would be enough. The loneliness and weariness had weighed heavily on him for too long and he could think of nothing else that could relieve the dull ache and the anger he'd carried for a month. Somewhere his wife was waiting and Carmody wanted desperately to join her, but the time had to be of his choosing, not theirs.

Kaz lifted his head suddenly. "I hear something."

"I don't," Harry snapped. "What's wrong with you? Let's finish and get moving."

"Something about this guy is bugging me."

"Let it bug you later. We have to move!"

"Shut up and let me think," said Kaz. He examined Carmody critically. "You said it in the car yourself. He *did* push himself into the picture so we would take him along, and just as you said, we stirred no action this time. Now, if all he wanted was to get himself killed, if he was a private citizen working this on his own, the cops would still have been after us. *But there were no cops!* You expect

me to believe they're going to sit back and let us knock over banks without lifting a finger?"

"What difference does it make now?"

"He *has* to be some sort of a cop, you idiot! He was there for some reason and we were stupid enough to take him along. Look at him. He's a pro and a good one. We knock him off and they have us for murder one!"

Harry was disgusted. "Cop or not, how are they going to do that? Nobody followed us. There wasn't even a helicopter."

The faint squealing of car tires protesting a sharp turn at high speed sounded faintly on the thin evening air.

"You see?" screamed Kaz. "I don't know how he did it but they're right on us. They've been on us all along and he knew it."

Harry lined the gun up on Carmody.

"No!" Kaz yelled at him. "Not now! It's too late!"

Carmody could hear the cars closing in, engines racing. The two men glared at each other, only the eyes alive in the dead rubber masks. There wasn't enough time to turn the car around and no chance to get past the cars coming up the rutted tracks.

"We take him with us. That will keep them off our backs."

"What good is a hostage who doesn't care if he gets killed? He'll force us to get rid of him and we'll be wide open. What do you think will happen then? He's useless. Leave him."

"Then I'll leave him dead!" said Harry savagely. "We owe him!" His gun darted forward and Carmody dropped, rolled and came to his feet running. Harry fired and missed, missed again as Carmody dodged behind a tree trunk.

"Fool!" yelled Kaz. "Let him go! They're almost here!"

Harry hesitated, cursed, then the two of them took off through the trees. Carmody watched them disappear. How close had it been, he wondered. An inch? Six inches? How close had he been to joining his wife, and how could Harry have missed at that range?

The idea hadn't really been there in the beginning. He had volunteered to stand around in the bank they thought would be hit next, in the faint hope the two would take him along as the hostage. The plan had worked. With three stations triangulating on the small transmitter hidden in the cigarette pack he'd tucked alongside the rear seat, the car's location was pinpointed as it moved along, the cars following just out of sight, taking directions over the radio. They were to move in only if the car stopped,

because it was when the car stopped the hostage was turned loose.

Carmody slowly brushed sand from his clothes.

For a month now, he had felt himself moving like an automaton, going through the motions of living. Glimpsing that cemetery had put the thought in his head—*what for?* Was he to spend the rest of his life like this? If he could get Harry and Kaz to kill him, and still get the job done, who would be hurt except himself?

It had almost worked. A few minutes later and the cars closing in would have found him dead, but still would have been able to catch up to Harry and Kaz. However, Harry had missed twice, which Carmody still couldn't understand, and there was no way Carmody could have prevented that except by standing still. While he didn't mind dying, it went against the grain to be executed like a sheep led to slaughter.

He wove his way through the trees to the car. Harry or Kaz might make it, perhaps even both, but it didn't matter. Carmody had the names, and the car would be loaded with prints.

A police cruiser and a sedan slammed to a stop, men pouring out.

"That way." Carmody pointed.

"Watch yourself. Each of them has a gun."

One of the men dove for the radio. "They're not going anywhere. Not in there. I'll start the boys from the other road moving in."

Larson, the special agent in charge of the local office and responsible for the transmitter plan, joined Carmody quietly. "For a while there I was sure I'd lost a man. When the radio told us where the car stopped, I thought you were through. They always let the hostages off near a small town. Letting you go here in the middle of nowhere didn't make sense so we moved fast. Lucky we did. I heard the shots. How close was it?"

"Close," admitted Carmody.

"Well, the thing worked just like the lab men said it would. I don't think we were more than two miles behind all the way. I was feeling real good up until the time they told us where the car stopped. Dammit, I wouldn't have let you volunteer if I thought anything would happen, but they always let the hostages go before. They find out you were with the bureau?"

"No. At the end they had the idea I was one of the local police." Carmody regretted the words the moment he said them.

Larson picked them up immediately. "At the end? Then why did

they bring you here in the first place?"

Carmody smiled thinly. "Just pushing them a bit. Guess I pushed too hard." He imagined trying to explain to Larson but gave up. Larson went by the book and when he gave you orders, you did as you were told.

"Frank," said Larson slowly, "I told you very specifically to play it safe. The way you've been acting lately, I had a hunch—"

"Doesn't matter now," said Carmody wearily. "Let's get that transmitter turned off. We still have people with earphones glued to their heads."

Out of the corner of his eye, Carmody caught movement between the trees and whirled to see a crew-cut man step out, gun leveled. He shoved Larson aside and dove for the ground.

Harry had slipped off the mask, doubled back, picked his way between the men in the dim light and headed for the cars, hoping to find them unguarded, finding Carmody and Larson instead—an unarmed Carmody and a Larson stunned momentarily because his head hit the car when Carmody shoved him—and Harry took it all in at a glance, added it up and sprinted for the last car in line, still unnoticed by Larson.

Carmody did the only thing he

could do. He picked himself up and charged at Harry, who broke stride just long enough to throw a shot at him. Larson, still dazed, reacted automatically. Seeing a running figure shoot at Carmody, he drew and fired, and Harry stopped, stumbled and went down.

It took Carmody a few minutes to recover from the shock of the bullet. He sat up slowly, fingers exploring his numbed leg, only now beginning to send the first faint waves of pain.

Larson knelt beside him, the first aid kit from the cruiser in his hand. "He one of them?"

"Harry," said Carmody. "The driver. He missed me before."

"Your guardian angel must be watching over you real close tonight."

Pulsating pain was beginning to move up Carmody's leg while Larson fixed the wound as best he could.

The night had finally rolled in and someone turned on the cruiser spotlight. The pain was intense now, causing Carmody to clench his teeth. Harry must have nicked

the bone, he decided, the agony beading his face with perspiration and making the faces in the harsh brightness swim before his eyes.

As they helped him toward the car, his head lifted. Listening, Carmody wasn't sure if it was the pain, the sudden cold wind whispering in the trees, or his imagination, but it seemed he could hear his wife's voice from the darkness outside the blinding light, gently scolding him for thinking she would ever really leave him and telling him that she wanted no nonsense like this from him again.

Carmody found himself smiling. The pain no longer mattered. The anger was gone. The loneliness would remain, but it would be different.

"Maybe I should get a hearing aid," he mumbled.

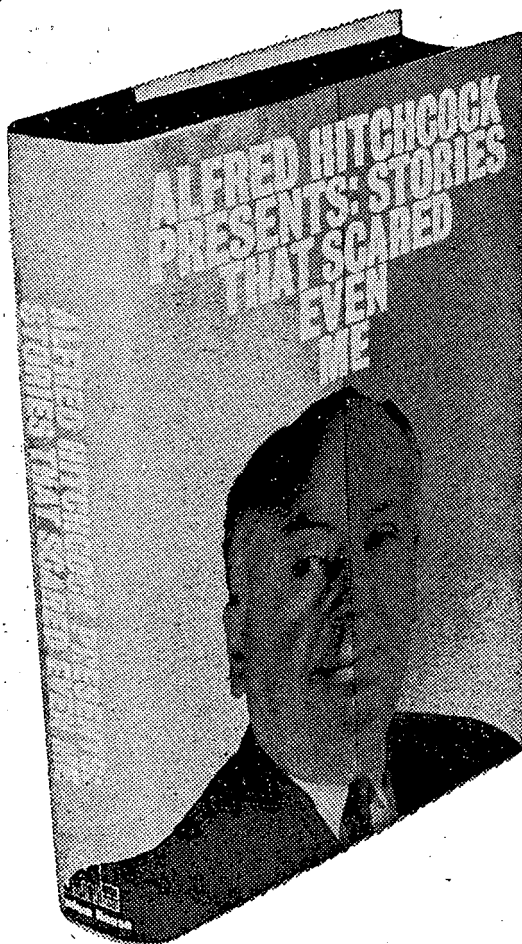
"A what?" Larson's voice sounded far away, interlaced by a thread of tenderly teasing laughter.

Carmody shook his head to clear it. "A hearing aid," he said. "Someone's been trying to tell me something all afternoon, but I couldn't hear it until now."



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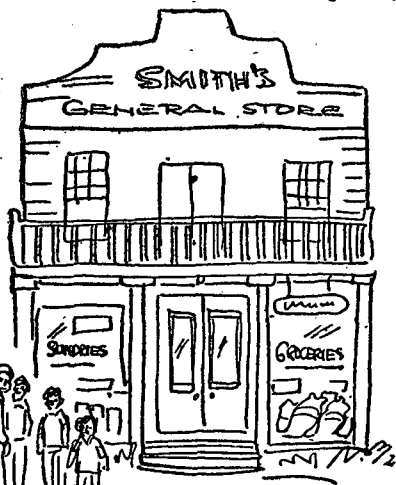
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*The pot may be doomed to slandering the kettle, for always  
has it been thus.*

# The Return



## of Crazy Bill



by  
**Frank Sisk**

AS I DRINK a second cup of coffee, my eyes rove idly through the inside pages of the morning paper. Whatever I may have expected seems to be there: a quick recipe for marshmallow brittle, a speculative piece on the long-range effects of LSD, an interview with a 100-year-old man who has never drunk anything more intoxicating than dandelion wine, the bannered

bargains to be had in chuck roast and honeydew melons at the local supermarkets . . .

Torpidly I notice a straight news report datelined Bern, Switzerland. It concerns an inquest into the death of a woman I have never met, but as I read the several scraps of evidential matter thrice over I find myself in a swift descent down the years—thirty of them—back to the days of my childhood when my world was bordered on the east by Indian Falls and High Ridge, on the south by Fournier's Meadow, on the west by Smith's General Store & Post Office, and on the north by the infinity of the future. Looming large in this world for a time, larger even than my parents, was Crazy Bill.

By our standards, Crazy Bill was old—forty, at least. He had a scraggly graying beard and great popping green eyes, one of which was glass. He wore a high-crowned straw hat with a wide wavy brim. He finally lost this hat, as you will see later.

Except for a fringe of gray hair that grew over his ears and joined the beard, he was bald. He always wore a checkered shirt open at the collar. His throat was scrawny. The sleeves were rolled halfway up his forearms, showing on the right one a tattoo of a snake coiled around an anchor. Invari-

ably he wore a pair of faded blue overalls suspended from his sagging shoulders by pieces of rope. In one of the overall pockets high on his chest he carried cigar butts salvaged from around the steps of Smith's General Store. He broke these butts up and smoked them in a corncob pipe. His shoes were the thicksoled yellow kind, with leather loops at the back, and when they wore out he threw them away in the woods and stole another pair from somewhere.

He roamed the woods, of course, and lived in a cave amid the ledges and fissures that flanked Indian Falls. Crazy Bill's Cave, we called it.

High Ridge, elevation 300 feet, cannot be compared with the towering 3285 meters of Col Supérieur du Tour mentioned in the Switzerland news report, but we considered it in those days the steepest height on earth.

By "we" I mean myself and my younger brother Charlie, Roger Oliver and his little brother Austin, Fred Lyons, and Red Dacey. There were several others whose names I don't remember offhand, but those I've listed are still pictured in my mind as clearly as if I'd seen them only yesterday.

My brother Charlie is all freckles and ears. (He doesn't look like that now; the freckles have become



floridity in a worried round face that neutralizes the ears.) Fred Lyons is undersized for his age, with a dimpled chin receding slightly. Roger Oliver is blond and blue-eyed and possesses a daredevil smile I secretly admire. His brother Austin, also blond, is possibly the quietest boy in the county, never venturing much beyond a monosyllable. And Red Dacey—well, he's somehow the color of sand; sandy hair, pale yellow eyebrows, a glint of ocher in the retina; and he bites his fingernails when things don't go his way. Red is the one who first called our attention to Crazy Bill; first learned about him from some mysterious source; first saw him in person, it seems.

We were blazing a trail, I remember, in the woods behind Indian Falls. Red Dacey's father had given him a birthday gift of a hunting knife in a beaded leather sheath, an impossible gift for the rest of us whose parents were dead set against knives. So there we were, doing as the Indians did, single file behind Red Dacey, who was nicking little chips off the saplings all the way across Fournier's Meadow and up the woodland slopes to the rockier ground until we came at last to the topmost cliff of High Ridge. Below us was a jagged gray drop and off in the

distance were the identifiable rooftops of our family homes. The din of Indian Falls was so loud that we had to shout to be understood.

"The shortest way home is straight down," Roger Oliver yelled.

"What do you mean?" I yelled back.

"With a rope tied to this tree," he pointed to a gnarled dogwood, "we could let ourselves down the face of the cliff easy. If we had a rope, a long enough one."

"It's easier to walk around by the old path," Charlie piped up.

"Easier. Sure. And about three times longer. Besides, it wouldn't fool anyone who might be following us."

Austin Oliver nodded solemn agreement.

And Fred Lyons asked: "Who's following us, Roger?"

"Nobody that I know of. I mean *if*, that's all. *If* somebody was on our trail, they'd lose us right here. Like we'd walked off into thin air."

We found the concept intriguing, like so many of the ideas that Roger had, and we were beginning to speculate about acquiring a rope when Red Dacey broke in.

"You'd get killed," he said.

"Not if I had a strong long rope," Roger replied.

"The rope don't matter any. By the time you were halfway down,

Crazy Bill would reach out and grab you."

"Who's Crazy Bill?" I asked.

"Reach out from where?" from Charlie.

"He's got a cave halfway down the cliff," Red said.

"Crazy Bill?" Fred Lyons said nervously. "A cave?"

Red turned to Roger. "You mean you've never seen him?"

"I never even heard of him," Roger said.

"Well, it goes to show you ain't as smart as some people think you are," Red said. "Follow me. I'll show you the cave."

As we wended our way down the old path I felt sure I was not the only skeptic present. Red had a habit of throwing a monkey wrench in the works whenever Roger came up with a new angle on adventure. I figured this was just one more scene stealer.

Ten minutes later we arrived at the familiar clearing beside Ice Water Brook and, through squinting eyes, started a slow study of High Ridge's craggy face. We had all seen it a dozen times before and had never seen anything in particular because we had never been looking for anything like a cave.

"Well, there it is," Red said, pointing a finger.

"Where?" I asked.

"Halfway up to the left there.

Where there's a ledge sticking out like a porch."

"I don't see it," Roger said.

"Look where I'm pointing and you will," Red said.

We bunched up behind him and took aim along his extended arm.

"I think I see it now," Charlie said. "Like a big crack in the cliff."

"That's it," Red said. "That's the entrance. And inside there's a room as big as a cellar."

I don't think I really saw anything, but I imagined I did and nodded my head. Red became a lawyer later in life and I've heard he had a magic way with juries.

"I think I see it now," Fred Lyons said uncertainly.

"I still don't see a darn thing," Roger said.

"That's because you probably need glasses," Red said.

"Bushwah."

"All right, wise guy, but the last kid that Crazy Bill caught alone in the woods—well, he disappeared forever."

"Who was that?" Roger demanded.

"Billy Snider."

"He moved to Syracuse. *Everyone* knows that."

"His *parents* moved to Syracuse. Not Billy."

"I never heard that before."

"It's true, though. The Sneiders moved away because they couldn't

stand to live in a place where Billy just got lost."

"And you think it was Crazy Bill caught him?" Charlie asked, eyes wide.

"I can't prove it," Red said. "But I'm pretty sure."

"How come you know so much about all this?" Roger wanted to know.

"My father told me," Red said positively.

For the moment that ended the argument. In our young world a father's testimony was final. As I say, this all happened 30 years ago, before the coming of flower children.

A bit later, as we were beginning to wander back home, Red let out a hoot. "There he is. Up there on the ledge. Look quick."

We all turned fearfully.

"Did you see him?" Red asked excitedly. "He was standing there just as plain!"

"I think I saw him," Fred Lyons said.

"His face is all whiskers," Red said. "You saw him, didn't you, Austin?"

"Yes," Austin said.

"No, you didn't, Aussie," Roger said.

"Yes," Austin persisted.

"You're seeing things," Roger said. "There's nothing up there in those rocks. I'll prove it to you

tomorrow without any question."

"How?" Fred Lyons asked.

"Wait and see," Roger said, smiling-like a daredevil.

By some unspoken agreement we met the following morning after breakfast under the crabapple tree in Fournier's Meadow. I carried a bamboo cane. Charlie toted a baseball bat. Red wore his new knife and sheath. Roger had a hank of frayed rope (a discarded clothes-line) looped over his shoulder. In a sense, we were armed against the contingency of evil.

"What are we going to do?" Fred Lyons asked apprehensively. He was equipped with a hammerless cap pistol.

"That's what I'd like to know," Red said, with a challenging look at Roger.

"I'm going to lower myself down to that cave with this rope," Roger said. "Let's go."

"You're crazy," Red said.

"We'll see who's crazy. You coming along?"

Again single file (the safest way to travel in the wilderness), we made our way up the summer slopes, where a few of Mr. Fournier's cows were ruminating, to the previously blazed trail that took us in about fifteen minutes to our goal. In unaccustomed silence we watched as Roger unshouldered the rope and tied an end of it to

the dogwood tree. This rope didn't look long enough or strong enough to do the job, and finally I said so.

"Maybe you're right," Roger said. "I'll test it."

He found a boulder twice the size of a football and turned the rope around it twice and secured it with an impressive combination of knots. The boulder must have weighed more than 100 pounds because it took two of us—Charlie and me—to nudge it along the ground to the edge of the cliff. Roger payed out the rope while Fred, Red and Austin watched.

"Ready, get set," I said.

"Give me a hand with the rope, somebody," Roger said.

Austin jumped to his side.

"Not you, Aussie. You're too light."

Red was the heaviest, but he didn't move.

Fred Lyons, not much heavier than Austin, finally came forward and cautiously took some of the slack rope in both hands.

"Ready?" I asked.

Digging his heels into the stony ground, Roger nodded.

Charlie and I pushed the boulder over the side. The rope grew taut and began to pull Roger and Fred quickly forward. Fred was more hindrance than help. I grabbed the moving rope myself and reared

backwards. That stopped the boulder's descent. Roger heaved a sigh.

"Now," he said, after a few seconds, "easy does it."

Together we began paying out the rope, a hand's width at a time. One-two, one-two, one— And suddenly we were flat on our backs with an end of the rope snapping at the air above us.

"Look at that rock bounce," Charlie was yelling.

I can hear it to this day, and especially well this morning, as it slams its way downward from outcropping to ledge until at last it concludes its bruising course in a muffled thud, which means it is half buried in the sod near Ice Water Brook. (The news story from Switzerland reports that Miss Miriam Ryman, falling 1000 meters from a glacial precipice, was found to have broken every bone in her body when recovered two days later from a snowfilled moraine.)

The next afternoon we found one of Crazy Bill's shoes. It happened as we were engaged in one of our recurring expeditions to learn the source of Ice Water Brook. We never did find this source, as I recall, but each exploratory trip always carried us a little farther upstream and into a new realm of speculation.

"I bet it begins up on Sachem Hill," Charlie was saying.

"How far is that?" Fred asked.  
"Five or six miles, at least," Charlie said.

"Hey, take a look here," Red called from a thicket of cattails.

We hastened to his side. There amid a lush crop of skunk cabbage was a mildewed shoe with a big hole in the sole. It was a man's yellow work shoe, a leather loop at the back, and somehow it seemed to menace us by its very emptiness.

"Crazy Bill's," Red said in a whisper.

We kept staring at that shoe in horrified fascination.

"I bet he's watching us," Red whispered again.

Peering into the alders and birches that surrounded us, we expected to see wicked green eyes (one of which we now knew to be glass, for Red Dacey had been intermittently describing Crazy Bill in minute detail) taking our measure before an all-out assault. Then we were running headlong downstream, except for Roger, who limited himself to a rapid walk, though he looked suspiciously from side to side.

A couple of days later we found the straw hat in Mr. Fournier's apple orchard. The apples were still green and hard. Again it was Red who identified the old hat as Crazy Bill's.

Roger contested the claim. "It's

just any old hat. Probably belongs to one of the men who were spraying here last week."

"It's Crazy Bill's," Red said smugly.

"How can you tell?" I asked.

"I've seen him wearing it."

"Where?"

"Down at Smith's."

"He goes to Smith's?" Roger asked scornfully. "Leaves his cave and goes down to Smith's?"

"Every Saturday morning," Red said.

"I'd just like to see that," Roger said.

"When's Saturday?" Charlie asked.

"Tomorrow," Fred Lyons said. He was the only boy around who kept track of time during summer vacation.

The next morning we were loitering, not too inconspicuously perhaps, in front of Smith's General Store & Post Office. To pass the time we were chewing jawbreakers that stained our lips along the chromatic scale from bright red to nauseous violet.

A little after nine, when the mail was officially up in the rental boxes, this old man—all of forty—drove a slow-moving, slack-backed horse with wagon to the high curb in front of Smith's. He was hatless and his head was bald. He had a beard. His checkered shirt was

open at the throat to a puff of gray hair. In short, he was exactly as I have described Crazy Bill earlier, even to the tattoo on his right forearm.

"Is that him?" Fred Lyons asked through orange-colored lips.

Red Dacey nodded, obviously pleased with himself.

Crazy Bill climbed down off the wagon and hung a feed bag over the horse's bowed head. His glass eye glittered fiercely.

"Gee whiz!" Charlie said in a low voice.

Crazy Bill gave the old horse an affectionate pat, then entered Smith's.

I remember wondering why he should like horses and hate kids. Another incongruity half came to mind also: where would a cave dweller keep a horse and wagon like that?

"I'm going to buy a brand new rope," Roger Oliver was saying.

"Yes," Austin said.

"What for?" Red asked.

"To lower myself down to that cave," Roger said. "If there's any such thing as a cave."

"You'll find out," Red said.

"I'll find out a lot of things, maybe," Roger said.

"Like what?" Red said.

"Like the truth," Roger said.

"Oh yeah?" Red seemed to be getting mad about it. "A lot you

know about the truth. Besides, a good rope'll cost you probably more than a dollar."

"I got two dollars saved up," Roger said, and without further argument he left us on the run to get his savings.

We hung around a while longer, the rest of us, and pretty soon Crazy Bill came out of Smith's with a few pieces of mail in his hand and nosed around the stone steps until he found a cigar butt of suitable length, which he pocketed. Then he took the feedbag off his horse and, as he climbed aboard the creaking wagon, we scattered to the four winds full of the mysterious depravity that we had seen close up.

Early that evening, just after supertime, Mr. Fournier and his beagle found Roger Oliver's broken body at the foot of High Ridge. The state police came and investigated. They even asked Charlie and me a few questions and they smiled when we told them about Crazy Bill. In the end, Roger's death was attributed to the accidental breaking of the rope.

We kids knew better. We knew Roger would never spend his hard-saved money on a rope not strong enough for the job.

A few Saturdays later, my father and I were coming out of Smith's when Crazy Bill drove up.

"There he is, Pa," I whispered excitedly. "The man I've been telling you about."

"You mean Jim Punch?"

"Crazy Bill we call him. He's the man who killed Roger."

My father's face grew stern. "Stop that nonsense, boy. The man on the wagon is Jim Punch. He lives with his crippled old mother over in Palmerston. A bit simple, perhaps, but he wouldn't hurt a fly."

"But he lives in a cave in High Ridge," I insisted.

"He lives on a hardpan farm in Palmerston," my father said.

"But *somebody* had to cut the rope," I said. "It was new. It wouldn't just *break*, would it?"

"Don't you remember what the police said, boy? The rope was likely cut by the flinty edge of the rock formation. Either that or it had a flaw."

That's what the police said. They said it thirty years ago, before investigatory techniques had attained certain refinements quite commonplace today, and intuitively I have always felt the police were wrong.

The inquest into the violent death of Miss Miriam Ryman proves how right I was. For instance, a microscopic examination of the broken strand of nylon rope found around Miss Ryman's waist convinced the Swiss authori-

ties that a sharp knife had performed the severance.

Suspicion that Miss Ryman's death might not be accidental was first aroused, according to the news story, when her fiancé, Leonard Hull, a junior partner in the New York law firm of Dacey & Mitchell, went to the police with a tale of passion and jealousy.

Miss Ryman was the private secretary to the firm's senior partner, W. R. Dacey, who had conceived an ungovernable passion for her. Though married himself and the father of three children, Dacey would not listen to reason. Upon hearing of Miss Ryman's betrothal to Hull, he flew into a fit of jealous rage, but several days later, apparently reconciling himself to the inevitable, he had suggested a combined business and pleasure trip to Switzerland. The pleasure consisted of skiing and mountain climbing and ended for Hull with a broken ankle.

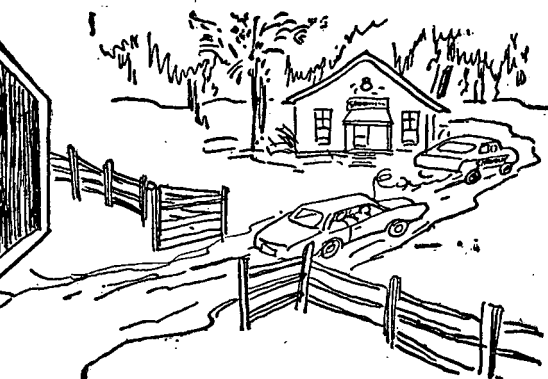
"I was in a cast that fatal day Miriam and Bill decided to try conquering Les Trois Cols," Hull allegedly told police. "We were to leave for Paris the following morning. Knowing Bill's dog-in-the-manger complex, I should have . . ."

W. R. Dacey. William. Bill. Not until this morning did I realize this was Red's given name.

*Herein lies a sound argument for public transportation.*



on  
the  
ROAD  
SOUTH



Stan and his wife, Barbara, had been driving steadily since dawn. It was a familiar, monotonous trip and, always in a hurry to escape the winter, they generally paused only once for a few hours of sleep.

**T**HEY had just left a swift span of interstate highway but now the route south toward Florida was continued on a narrow, two-lane road which would pass through a series of small towns. Determined to reach their usual stopping place between New York and Florida before midnight, Stan Sherwood ignored the reduced speed limit and poured gas to his luxurious new sedan.

Stan Sherwood had been an account executive for a large New York stockbroker. His personal speculations were often far more daring than those of his clients, and at thirty-eight he had amassed a fortune large enough to drift for the rest of his life if he chose. He had sold all but a few blue-chip stocks, and was on the way to another fortune in Florida real estate.



Beside him, Barbara, thirty-one, mink coated and attractive, though at times she looked deceptively haughty, poured coffee from a vacuum bottle. She offered him the cup.

"No thanks, honey. Way that stuff tastes, I'm sure it's the same batch of coffee they served up last year, slightly warmed over. All the roadside joints in these burgs share the same coffee grounds."

She chuckled. "They must share

## A NOVELETTE by ROBERT COLBY

the same cook, too. All the food tastes alike."

"In this part of the country you don't call it food," he said. "Don't you read the signs? *Eats and gas*. Gives it that homey touch. Just plain folks serving just plain eats and just plain gas."

"They don't season the gas, either?"

"Not really," he replied. "Sometimes they add a little water." She lighted a cigarette for him and he asked the time.

"Going on ten," she reported. "Sleepy?"

"Not sleepy. Tired."

"Want me to drive?"

"We'll have to stop for gas in a while. Then we'll switch."

They crossed a bridge and a sign advised a change of county. Another sign reminded that the night speed limit was fifty. He was doing a little better than sixty-five and again he ignored the warning.

Moments later, there was a flash of red in his rearview and he swore softly as the patrol car pulled abreast and a cop waved him over. The money would be no problem, the ticket only an annoyance, but with the out-of-state tag they would haul him in to post bond or pay the fine. The way these jerk-water cops went about things it might be a slow process and, already exhausted, the delay would prevent them from making it to the luxury and rest of the best motel along the entire route.

"Probably cost us nearly an hour," he told Barbara as he braked and pulled to the side of the road.

"Maybe they'll just give you a warning," she suggested hopefully.

He snorted. "Never. They'll take a look at the car and another look at you in that mink and they'll double the fine. These hicks live on the blood of tourists zipping through their hayseed hamlets in big cars on the way to Florida."

"You sound like a professional cynic," she said. "No doubt it's just a job to them and they couldn't

care less about where we live."

With a sigh, Stan cut the motor and waited. There were two cops and one of these, partner to the driver, got out and approached Stan's window with cocky-casual strides. He was big and tall and booted. Something in the cut of his uniform and his unbending posture gave him a Gestapo-like arrogance.

Stan poked the button and the electric window slid down to admit a draft of frigid air.

"Your driver's license, sir," the cop demanded.

Stan removed the license from his wallet and handed it over. The cop studied it briefly under a flashlight, returned it.

"We'll have to take you in to the station, Mr. Sherwood," he said, his mouth tight, his face a pale, sharp stone in shadow.

"Well," said Stan, producing a fifty dollar bill, "I'll admit that I was speeding, but we're mighty pressed for time. So why don't you just take this fifty and pay the fine for me, Officer. I'd be most grateful."

The cop glanced at the bill without touching it. His lips spread contemptuously. "Now, you know better than that, mister. Besides, I think you're gonna have a lot more to worry you than a little ole speedin' citation."

"Look, Officer," Stan replied, stuffing the bill into his wallet, "please don't threaten me. Just say what you mean."

"You'll find out what I mean soon enough." His eyes swept over the car, slid inside to Barbara. He motioned to his partner to drive on ahead, then climbed imperiously into the back of the sedan. "Get behind that patrol car," he ordered. "It'll lead you to the station."

Stan started the motor and followed the taillights of the retreating cruiser. No use arguing with a rube cop, he decided. Keep calm, speak to someone in higher authority.

"Why don't you tell us what it's all about," Barbara said waspishly, turning toward the cop, her face taut, angry. "You imply that we've committed some crime, when we were only speeding, as you know very well."

"Shut up," Stan said softly. "It's obviously a mistake, and I'll straighten it out with the officer in charge."

Shortly, they left the highway and rode a broken blacktop for a mile and a half before taking a dirt road to a gate which opened upon a squat frame building. There was a green globe above the door and a sign: *Sheriff's Substation*. The building was small and gray and somber.

Escorted by the two officers, they entered a rectangular room containing a couple of scarred desks behind a railing, some wooden chairs, an ancient typewriter and a filing cabinet.

The driver cop pressed a button which was on the wall just inside the door and then they waited, standing about uncomfortably behind the railing.

After what seemed time enough to assemble a regiment, a man entered from a door at the back of the room. He was buttoning the jacket of a sheriff's uniform and smoothing a great welter of coarse black hair with a knotty hand. He was a heavy man, with a large nose set in a square, rockjawed face. His deep brown eyes under bushy brows seemed to have been startled from sleep. They studied Stan and his mink-coated wife with roving speculation.

"Well, well, what you got here, Floyd?" he said cheerfully to the arresting officer, whose partner was slouched in a corner, smoking a cigarette.

"We got trouble, Sheriff," said Floyd, and stepped behind the rail.

The sheriff seated himself at a desk and they conferred inaudibly, a frown grooving the sheriff's homely features. Floyd passed him a slip from his notebook, in which he had been writing under the

flash on the back seat of the Sherwoods' car. The sheriff searched the filing cabinet and came up with a square of paper which he placed on his desk beside the deputy's notations. For a moment he compared the two papers. He glanced up darkly.

"Speeding," he declared. "I got no use for speeders, none at all. This county, we go mighty hard on speeders. We fix it so they don't forget us in no hurry. That's a fact but, mister, you got a real good excuse—ain't that right?"

"No, sir," Stan said meekly. "I have no reasonable excuse and I'm sorry. I'd like to pay the fine."

"No reasonable excuse, huh? Well now, I disagree. When a man is drivin' a stolen car worth close to ten grand, he's got all the excuse in the world to be hustlin' down the road. 'Cause he's just naturally gonna be in a hurry to escape the law. And I call that plenty reasonable."

"Stolen car!" Stan said incredulously. "What stolen car? I bought that car in New York three months ago and I've got the registration to prove it's mine." He fumbled the ID from his wallet and thrust it across the rail.

The sheriff examined it, then glanced at the paper on his desk. He looked up. "Same car all right, accordin' to the hot-sheet."

"Then it's all a mistake, right?"

"Nope. Wrong! Way I see it, you and the woman swiped the car from this here Sherwood. Maybe it was some sort of con game, it don't say here, but anyway, you got the car from this guy, along with his wallet and papers."

"Fantastic!" Stan snapped. "Absolutely fantastic! My name is Sherwood, and this lady is Mrs. Sherwood."

"Yes," Barbara said indignantly, "I'm Mrs. Barbara Sherwood and this is my husband. Do we look like a couple of car thieves?"

"Well—I must admit," the sheriff retorted, "that even in that stolen mink you look pretty good to me, miss. But over to the state lockup for women we got a few dames just as classy." He snickered. "And not near as sassy." He grinned.

"I don't care for your sense of humor, Sheriff, whatever-your-name," Stan growled.

"Sheriff Clyde Hamlin, mister. And you better get used to my sense of humor 'cause you may be enjoyin' it for some time to come." He leaned back and lit a cigar in a smug, lazy motion.

"That right?" said Stan.

"Mmmmm," said Hamlin, nodding happily, forming a circle with his lips, pushing smoke at them across the railing. "Yup, that is the

God's honest truth I'm tellin'."

"I'm accused of stealing my own car?"

Hamlin stared with narrowed eyes.

"What about my signature? I can sign my name exactly as it's signed on these papers in my wallet."

"Good con man is also a good forger. Ain't that so, Bart?" he said to the second officer. "You was a guard over to the state prison and you should know."

"Yes, sir, Sheriff," he answered. "Take my word for it."

"If it's your car," said the deputy, Floyd, "show us the title, or a bill of sale."

"D'you think I would carry papers like that around with me? They're in a safety deposit box."

"Too bad," the sheriff said. "They won't help you none there."

"I'd like to call my lawyer," Stan said.

Hamlin nodded. "Sure, you got a local man?"

"Of course not! I don't even know the name of the nearest town. I mean my lawyer in New York."

"We don't allow long distance calls."

"I'll pay for the call."

"Don't matter. It's a rule—and a rule is a rule. Any case, New York shyster won't do you no good. Likely he couldn't get here for a

day or two. The court will appoint an attorney."

"All right," Stan said wearily. "How much to buy us out of this phony rap?"

The sheriff leaned forward sharply. "That sounds like a bribe to me. You got one charge of attempted bribery 'gainst you already. This officer tells me you tried to grease him with a fifty. I'd advise you to keep your mouth shut before you lose your whole leg in it, mister."

"I'd like to post bail," Stan said quietly.

Hamlin shook his head. "Can't do that tonight. Auto theft is a felony, in which case only the judge can set the amount of bail."

"And just when will the judge be available to set bail?"

"Can't say exactly. He's got a mighty stack of cases to handle, 'nough to fill a barn. With luck he might get around to it tomorrow, but I wouldn't take no bets."

"And meanwhile?" Stan said with forced control.

"Meanwhile, this place is kinda like a motel with bars. We got some nice rooms in back, all free. The chow ain't good, but it ain't bad, either. Step forward and empty your pockets on this here desk!"

Stan hesitated. Floyd clutched him by the arm and maneuvered

him through a swinging gate to the desk. Beside his cash-heavy wallet, Stan placed his keys, a handkerchief, a book of traveler's checks amounting to fifteen hundred dollars, and his own personal checkbook. An expensive watch and a gold ring were also demanded of him.

The sheriff jammed a piece of paper into the typewriter. "Your name?" he questioned.

"Stanley Sherwood."

"Your *real* name?"

"Stanley Sherwood."

"John Doe," said the sheriff, typing.

"Your address?"

"Same as the one on my registration and driver's license."

"Address unknown," the sheriff mumbled, typing again.

"Occupation?"

"Stock and real estate investments."

Hamlin continued typing. He went over the items on the desk, listing them, counting the money and checks. He gave the paper to Stan, who read it in a haze of anger and frustration, certain he would awake from this sordid dream at any moment.

He glanced up at his wife, who stood gaping beyond the rail. Wide-eyed, she had doubled a black-gloved hand and was chewing her knuckles. She looked hope-

lessly inept and fragile. He felt pity for her and at the same time he resented her silly pose, wishing she would break the silence with an explosive scene in his defense.

"If it's all correct, sign it," Hamlin ordered, extending a pen.

Stan signed the paper and the sheriff stowed it away in a drawer of the desk. His eyes fastened upon Barbara. "You're next, miss," he said. When she stood rooted, Bart took her wrist and pulled her, stumbling, to the sheriff's desk.

"Keep your hands off my wife!" Stan barked.

"Make me," Bart said with a slit grin, one hand resting on the butt of his holstered revolver.

"Don't gamble I won't," Stan said evenly, his muscles tensing dangerously.

"Now don't race your motor," said the sheriff, removing the cigar from moist lips in a leisurely gesture. "You're just makin' noise but you ain't goin' nowhere." Again he eyed Barbara. "All right, little girlie, everything on the desk." When she stood dumbly, he plucked the pocketbook from her fingers. "You got a watch and a ring, let's have them too. Nothin' goes with you, law says. It's a nice warm cell and you won't need that fur, neither."

Although he had seen it coming, Stan had not believed that they would actually jail his wife. "She's

no part of this, Sheriff," he thundered. "You're not going to put my wife in some dirty cell!"

"Call her your wife if you want. The law says she's an accomplice and she goes into a cell like anyone else."

"Listen, Hamlin," Stan threatened, leaning on the desk, "you and your hick cops just try railroading *my* wife into jail on this trumped-up charge and when I get out I'll come back and spill your fat carcass all over this county!"

The sheriff casually took the cigar from his mouth, studied the glowing tip, then jammed it savagely against Stan's cheek, grasping him by the hair and grinding the ash deeply into his flesh with a twisting motion.

"I ain't sure you'll *ever* get out now," he said when Stan's scream faded to a soft moan, a palm held over his agonized cheek.

The sheriff opened Barbara's pocketbook and turned it upside down on his desk, where half a dozen items clattered, a lipstick rolling to the floor. Standing quickly, he caught her coat by the collar and yanked it from her. He jerked a glove from her hand and was working with demented energy to separate the big diamond from a reluctant finger when Stan shoved him off and punched him solidly in the mouth, giving a hundred eighty

pounds to the blow, plus the added steam of his fury.

Hamlin crashed to the floor in a sprawling heap. He climbed to his feet awkwardly, blood washing the fingers he held to his mouth. When he dropped the hand to his holster, he revealed a jagged gap of broken teeth.

He brought the gun up swiftly and fired. The little flame seemed to spurt directly at the center of Stan's forehead, but the shot was wildly aimed and only gouged a tiny notch from his left ear.

Floyd chopped the sheriff's wrist before he could squeeze off the carefully aimed second shot, Bart clubbed Stan from behind and darkness fell.

When Stan regained consciousness, he was lying on the bottom bunk in a cell so narrow it seemed almost possible to reach out and touch the opposite wall. Apparently the cell was windowless, though there was an air duct in the ceiling beside a naked globe.

A solid steel door sealed the room. It contained a slot large enough to deliver food and observe the prisoners. Against the back wall there was a large, covered bucket which he guessed was a concession to sanitation.

He surveyed these arrangements with only a small movement of his head. He felt somewhat as if

he had awakened from a monumental hangover. His head throbbed and there was a thin bandage taped to his ear. His cheek was sore to the touch and had begun to blister. His overcoat and gloves had been taken but otherwise he was dressed as before. The room was uncomfortably warm, the stale air tainted by the sharp odor of disinfectant.

Wondering now if there might be a companion prisoner, he climbed gingerly to his feet. No, the top bunk was vacant. He searched his pockets but they were all empty. Wrenching out of his suitcoat, he glanced about woefully. It was a strange cell, little more than a large coffin. Were they holding Barbara in a similar tomb? The thought depressed him unbearably. Further, he was stricken by a frightening sense of claustrophobia.

The only light, from beyond the door and cut to the size of its window, barely lifted the cell from darkness. How much time had passed? In such a place you couldn't tell night from day.

He went to the door and peered out through the chest-high slot. He viewed a narrow corridor spaced with three other doors, all identical. The cells were in a row, except for one which stood by itself at the right extreme of the brief passageway, crossing it. Where the



corridor terminated to the left, a guard sat cross-legged on a wooden chair, smoking a cigarette. A shotgun rested against the wall beside him.

Stan managed to put his head

through the opening and call to the guard, who ambled over with the cigarette fixed to his mouth. He was young and lanky. He had a slouching posture and a lean, farm-boy's face.



"Yeah?" he said. "What's the beef?" The cigarette bobbed between blade-thin lips.

"What time is it?" Stan asked him.

The guard examined his watch. "Ten past eleven."

"Night?"

"Sure, what else? You ain't been out much more'n a half hour. You feelin' okay?"

"Well, I'm alive, at least."

"You're lucky, friend. The sheriff and his goons play rough." He plucked the butt from his mouth and ground it under foot. "Man, you sure belted him a good one right in the kisser," he said delightedly. "He'll be huntin' up a coupla teeth for hisself."

"Sounds like you don't care much for the sheriff."

"Hamlin?" He smiled a crooked smile. "Hate his guts. Got plenty reason to, would take a year to tell. Listen, I don't hold with what he done to you people. Just remember that if the time ever comes when you get outta here."

"When do you think that'll be?"

"Huh!" he snorted. "No tellin'. Way you punched him out, you might rot in here for a month or more till he cools enough even to get his mind onto it."

"And my wife?"

"Same."

"No! He can't do it! The law

is clear! The law states that—"

"Clyde Hamlin is the law—his own law. 'Round here anyway."

"There are people above him we can reach."

"When? You'll have a beard down to your belly. 'Sides, he'll cover his tracks and his deputies'll swear to anythin' he builds up against you people."

"We'll see about that. What's your name?"

"Sam."

"Can you help us, Sam?"

"Don't see how."

"You could get word to someone for us."

"Nah. He'd find out and bust my head in. Can't risk it."

"I'd make it worth your while, Sam."

"A dead man ain't got no use for dough. You don't cross Hamlin. He's a nut. Outta his skull. Somethin' happened to him a while back, made him that way."

"What?"

"Tell you sometime, maybe. I gotta move on."

"You can't help us, then?"

Sam was silent, his bleak, bony features groping painfully with his thoughts. "Might be I could find some way to help," he said. "But not with the law."

"What then?"

"Don't know. Lemme think on it a bit."

"Where's my wife now, Sam?"

He pointed. "Down to the end. They got a special cell for women. She really your wife?"

"Yes. Is the cell like this one?"

"Pretty much. All them tin boxes're alike. One she's in is bigger. Holds four dames, five wormed in when business is good and it gets loaded up with customers."

Stan moaned. "She never saw the inside of a jail, let alone one like this."

"Supposed to be temporary," Sam said. "Just overnight stuff. They was gonna build a good one, never got around to it. You want a weed?"

"What?"

"A butt."

"Please. I could use one."

Sam produced a cigarette and held a match for him. As an afterthought, he handed over the rest of the pack. "Got plenty more," he said. "You wanna light, just holler. Prisoners ain't allowed no matches." He went away.

Beyond the door to the jail section, in the reception area, a tall, graying man in his sixties, neatly dressed and reflecting an air of moneyed dignity, was being confronted by Sheriff Hamlin and his patrol officers, Floyd and Bart.

"This is an outrageous complaint!" the man said forcefully,

though his voice trembled with emotion. "It's completely false and unjustified. You have no right to hold me another minute! What evidence do you have? Where's your witness?"

"Don't tell *me* what I can do," said Sheriff Hamlin, who was again behind his desk, scowling and nursing a badly swollen, discolored lip which at least had the advantage of concealing the recent embarrassment to his front teeth. "We get an APB to pick up a hit-run driver who slaughters some innocent woman crossin' a street in a town sixty miles north, we damn well are gonna grab that man and hold 'im till the law in that town sends people to return him to justice."

"Yessir, if it takes till doomsday, you'll be here when they come. The burden of proof is on them people. Evidence I don't need, beyond what's on this here piece of paper." He glanced down and began to read: "'A 1968 sedan, color, light green, with white-wall tires. Bears AAA emblem on rear bumper, the front right fender is dented.' That sound like your auto?"

"Yes, but that fender was damaged when a man backed out of—"

"Witness identifies license number as follows," Hamlin continued. "'Tag number ID-82347.' Now

how 'bout it, mister? That plate go with your car? And is the car registered in your name—Howard W. Stoneman?"

"Yes, but—"

"And would you be described as," glancing down at the paper again, "'a male Caucasian sixty some years, gray hair, slim build, appears to be tall . . .' Sound like you?"

"Yes, but I tell you it's a mistake! I never in my life—"

"That's enough, Stoneman. Step forward to this here desk and empty your pockets. C'mon, snap it up! Floyd, is this man nailed to the floor? Bring 'im here to me!"

Three days passed and, presumably, nights also, though one could not be distinguished from the other in the changeless confinement of the tiny cell.

On the night following his arrest, Stan Sherwood was given a reluctant companion to warm the top bunk. Dennis Kinard was a small, quiet man of fifty-two, unassuming behind steel-rimmed glasses, though he was vice-president of a national food products corporation. Like Stan, he had been traveling south to Florida, driving with his wife in a car which was practically fresh from the showroom floor.

He had been exceeding the speed

limit when arrested. Later, an open bottle of Scotch was found in the car. After his wife had been trapped into admitting that she had taken her turn at the wheel, the bottle was produced and they were both held on the ridiculous charge of drunk driving. They were in custody until the judge could "find time" to fix bail.

"Naturally," Kinard reasoned, "it's a frameup, some kind of swindle I haven't yet figured. Either that, or this peanut-town sheriff is a maniac with some sort of grudge against the world, especially the world of people who have a little stature and a degree of wealth.

"I don't know what other poor suckers they've got lumped in this sardine can, but I'd be willing to wager my grandfather's gold pocketwatch that they own shiny new cars the likes of which are rarely seen in these parts, except breezing through town on the way south."

"Well, I can't predict how or when the game will end," replied Stan. "But the guard, who appears a minor friend in the enemy camp, implies that Hamlin is a psycho who might be taking vengeance for something done to him in the past."

"When I get out," Kinard promised, "that man will hold office in a cell of his own, even if I have to

go before the governor himself!"

Since the arrival of Kinard, Sam, the guard, refused to discuss further his tentative offer of help. "I'm workin' on it," was all he would say in a whisper when he got Stan alone by the door. "Meantime, you don't tell nobody. You don't say nothin' to your mate there, understand?"

On the morning of the fourth day, with Stan in a frenzy of rage and frustration, Sam unlocked the door and took Dennis Kinard off to the "showers", winking at Stan behind Kinard's back. Stan did not understand the wink until it came his turn for the welcome cleansing.

The "showers" was a tiny cubicle at the end of the corridor. It was composed of a single, tin-stall shower, a wash basin and a mirror. Below the mirror on a shelf was an assortment of shaving equipment.

Sitting on a stool, cradling his shotgun, Sam delayed until Stan had bathed and was beginning to shave before he spoke.

"I been savin' you for the last," he said. "This way we can chew a bit longer without nobody breakin' it up. Now, first, I'm gonna tell you straight out about this here Sheriff Hamlin. Like I tole you, he's a nut. How he come to be that way is like this. Five, six months

back he had hisself a daughter. Pretty little thing, goin' on nine, she was. The mama, she done died long ago.

"Well, sir, the sheriff, he lives right smack onto the edge of the highway, this side of town—which is near to three miles south once you get to the main road. One day this city fella and his woman come speedin' down the highway all boozed up and goin' ninety to the wind in one of them sparky New York cars longer than Mr. Peabody's hearse. Speed limit says thirty, mind you, but they didn't pay it no heed."

"They hit his little girl, I suppose," said Stan, turning from the mirror with a lathered face.

"Sure, don't take no brain to see that. Clobbered her so hard she was squashed like a bug against the grill, then kept right on agoin' and never did get caught up. Truck driver seen the whole thing but he can't make the plate at that speed. Car just lost itself like smoke in a storm."

"How'd they know the people were drunk?" Stan questioned, yanking at his four-day beard with the razor but eyeing Sam in the mirror.

"Anyone flyin' that speed in a thirty mile zone has just got to be stone drunk," Sam said doggedly.

"So now Hamlin makes whip-

ping boys out of rich tourists who roll by in big, classy cars; that it, Sam?"

"How's that?"

"He takes revenge by arresting people like us on any old pumped-up charge he can find."

"Yeah, that's it. Longer he holds 'em, better he likes it, too."

"How does he get away with it?"

"Well, Clyde Hamlin is nuts, maybe, but he's sharper'n that razor. You could cut yourself on his brain."

"I'm sorry about his little girl," said Stan. "But that doesn't mean I excuse him." He washed the lather from his face and turned, mopping his skin with a paper towel. "Are you going to help us, Sam?"

"Might. Depends."

"Depends on what?"

"Depends on how well you scratch my back 'fore I scratch yours."

"Don't tell me you're on the take, Sam. That makes you almost as bad as Hamlin and his boys." Stan pulled on his soiled shirt and fingered the buttons. He was smiling a little, not really offended or surprised.

"No, sir, you can't put me in the same sty with Hamlin and his boys." Sam pinched his angular chin. "But I ain't much for pure

charity, neither. Not the way this thing has got to be done."

"How, Sam?"

"Well, since I can't pigeon to the law upstairs and it won't do no good nohow, the only way is to bust you people out."

"You could do that?"

"Late at night, when Hamlin is asleep and his goons're on patrol."

"Now you're talking, Sam!"

"Yeah, but course they'd know I done it. Couldn't be nobody else. One guard, that's me. Sleep in a little crib up front, this side of the cell block door. Sleep or no sleep, I'm always on call. Day off, Bart takes over—overtime guard hisself. I got no home, was glad to find even this hole to crawl into."

Stan tucked his shirt into his pants thoughtfully. "So, if they will know you let us go, what then?"

"That would blow it sky-high for me. Here lies Sam, like this—" He made a slit-throat gesture.

"Well, you must have the answer, Sam, or we wouldn't be talking, would we?"

"Only one answer. When I bust you folks out, I go along with you. Maybe just to the next state. Or maybe clear down to Florida. Yeah, that would be a gas. Summer sun and coconuts; pretty gals, 'n sand between the toes." His rustic features exploded in a toothy grin.

"Okay, Sam, you've got a deal."

"Not so fast, friend. Slow down so I can catch the brass ring. I'll need more'n a little ole ride south. I'll need a stake. A big stake. Good job gone, no place to duck in outta the rain, no steady eats to warm the belly. Now what I always wanted was to hitch up a little business of my own. Maybe a hash house, even a little old burger stand."

"I hear you, Sam, but you're far away. How much?"

"Well, I reckon ten grand would do it up sweet."

"Ten thousand! Sam, you're pulling my leg. Come down out of the clouds. Land somewhere close, will you?"

Sam lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "Ten grand," he said. "Take it or leave it. Listen, to me it's a chance in a lifetime. For you, just a fly in the soup. Big man like you, what's ten grand?" He stood. "Think on it, if you want. Ten grand against what? A coupla months, maybe six in this stinkin' can. I reckon more like six, to pay for the sheriff's busted teeth. Might be you could take it, big man. But not your woman. Another week and she'll climb the walls."

Stan nodded gravely. It was true. Barbara would not be able to endure such an experience. She would be broken by it. And it wasn't as if he couldn't afford the money

... "But I don't have that kind of money with me," he complained. "Where would I get it?"

"You write a check," said Sam, composing dramatically, a dreamy smile hovering about his thin lips. "And you make it out to me, Sam Packer. I take it to a bank where I got a bitsy account. I deposit the check and we wait. When it clears on through, I yank out all the dough, and then the three of us zoom off in your sparky gold car." He made a zooming motion with a sweep of his hand.

"It could take a good three or four days before a check on my bank would clear."

"Yeah, but I can have it rushed, special."

"And where would I get the check, Sam? My checkbook was impounded with everything else."

"All that stuff is in a locker," Sam said. "I can get my hands on the key."

"Can you also get your hands on the rest of our property? Traveler's checks, my wallet, watches, rings and coats?"

"For ten grand, why not?"

"And the car keys?"

"First thing, the keys. We ain't goin' nowhere without we got wheels!"

"How do I know I can trust you after you get the money?"

"What you want, a IOU? You

got anyone else you can trust in this joint?"

"All right, Sam. But I'm warning you—"

"Don't gimme no warnin' or the deal is off, pal."

"How soon do we get started with this?"

"Tonight, late. I'll come get you outta the cell. I'll take you to my bin to put your handle on the check. We'll do it when that Kinard fella is asleep. He might sing to Bart when it's his guard trick. Bart would carry it to Hamlin. Don't trust nobody, hear? You tell Kinard and you're a loser."

Stan nodded. "Can you let me see my wife for a minute?"

"Nope. Start a riot. Them other dames'd wanna chew with their men, same way. But I'll try to sneak word to her." With the barrel of the shotgun he gestured toward the door. "You ready? Let's go."

It was after two a.m. by Sam's watch when Sam came for him, Stan discovered later. As Kinard's polite snore testified to sleep, Sam hissed at the cell door, opened it. They stepped softly down the corridor to his oversized closet of a room. It surrounded a cot, a miniature desk and a chair. A uniform and other clothing hung on wall pegs.

Sam laid the shotgun on his cot and opened a drawer of his desk.

"Got the checkbook," he said, his hand searching inside the drawer. "I'll stick it in the locker again tonight and they won't never know the difference . . . Somewhere in here I got a pen," he muttered.

Stan had been eyeing the shotgun. It was within easy reach and Sam's back was turned. It was a frightening decision to make in a matter of seconds. If the cops were about, there might be a gunfight and someone could get hurt, including Barbara after he rescued her. On the other hand, if Sam crossed him . . .

Stan snatched the gun and leveled it. "Turn around, Sam. And be careful how you do it."

Sam froze in place for an instant before he peered over his shoulder and came about slowly. "That's the kinda faith you got in me, huh?" He said it with a puzzled shake of his head. "I thought we was friends."

"I never bought a friend who didn't sell me out, Sam. It isn't the money. Money can be replaced. I'm thinking of my wife. I want her out, and I'd rather gamble on this gun than on you. At least it's quicker."

Sam lit a cigarette without asking permission and leaned back against the desk. He was a cool one; all right. Even behind the gun, Stan felt overpowered by his confi-

dence. "I want the keys, Sam. To the cells, my car, and the locker."

Sam exhaled smoke. "You gonna tie me up or beat me down?"

"Neither. I'm going to poke this gun in your back while you help me."

"Suppose I won't give you the keys? Suppose I was to jump you right now for the gun? Would you blast me?"

"No, that would be noisy, Sam. I'd just quietly break a few bones in your head."

Sam smiled easily. "Well, I was just testin' you to see what you was made of. C'mon, let's get to work on that check. The gun ain't loaded." He turned and this time brought the checkbook and a pen from the desk drawer.

It was no lie. Stan found the gun empty. He tossed it to the cot disgustedly.

"Wouldn't keep no loaded gun near to my own mama," Sam sneered. "'Sides, you didn't have no chance. Had my hand on a button under the desk, sounds an alarm that could wake a stiff in the next county. No hard feelin's, I like your guts. Now sit down there and make up that check to old Sam Packer."

Stan shrugged. He sank into the chair and wrote the check.

"Time's runnin' out," said Sam, tucking the check into a pocket.

"C'mon, back to the cage, big bird."

Another day limped by, spaced only with the serving of meals which were neither good nor bad, merely tasteless. Logically, night would follow dinner, though there was no other mark of its coming but for Sam's watch and the erasure of cell lights at nine.

The day had been like all the others. Hamlin had not once appeared, even to gloat. Nor had his deputies, Floyd and Bart, been seen, though in the first two nights they had occasionally passed by the cell door, escorting well-groomed, harried prisoners of both sexes.

Following blackout, Stan fell asleep at once. He awoke after what seemed hours later, though morning had not yet been signaled by the harsh glare of overhead light. Restless, he lay on his back, staring inward at the tangled web of his thoughts. Oddly, when he heard the sound, he was involved with the absurd problem of trying to remember the precise color of Barbara's eyes. Was it possible that he really didn't know?

The sound was created by the stealthy opening of the cell door. He glanced up in time to see Kinard make a slithering entrance as Sam departed, locking the door with no more than a feeble snick of metal-on-metal.



Stan bounced off the bunk. Startled, Kinard paused abruptly, recoiling.

"Where you been?" Stan murmured, though he knew all too well.

"I—I had a powwow with Sam," Kinard low-voiced back. "I wanted him to get word out we were being held without process."

"Yeah? What'd he say?"

"Said no dice. Too big a risk."

"And that was when you wrote the check, huh?"

"What check?"

"You're a nice guy, Dennis, but you're also a lousy liar."

As if in confession, Dennis sat wearily on Stan's bunk and began to dry-wash his hands.

"When did you get the pitch? When he took you to the shower?"

In the gloom, Kinard's head bobbed affirmatively.

"And then he told you to keep your mouth shut to me or he'd slam the gate. Right?"

Kinard turned with a sad little smile of resignation. "I see you went the same route," he muttered.

"We've been taken!" Stan said, his voice rising recklessly. "Taken right along with every other sucker they scooped off the road into this sweatbox!"

"Yeah," said Kinard. "That does seem to be the way it is. What do we do now?"

"What do we do? What *can* we do? We sit and wait for them to deal the next card."

"Eventually they'll have to let us go," Kinard said weakly. "Won't they?"

"Eventually' could be six months. And when you come right down to it, why would they let us go at any time, under any circumstance you could name? We know too much and we're too many to be denied. Also, there'd be evidence in the form of canceled checks. Even the fact that we've been missing backs our story. By now, we're those people who mysteriously disappeared on the road south. They'll be combing the country for us."

"Still," Kinard said, "they don't really have any other choice but to let us go. Either they release us or they—"

"Or they what, Dennis? You're a crooked cop involved in a game of extortion so dirty you could be sent up for life if a sharp D.A. can build this into a kidnap-and-hold-for-ransom sort of crime. It certainly comes down to kidnapping—we simply paid our own ransom. All right, so what do you do with these so-called honest and reliable citizens who will pop up to accuse you if you turn them loose?"

"Well," Kinard replied, his horrified expression apparent even in the dusky cell, "I—I'd rather not

answer that question, if you don't mind."

"You already have," Stan told him.

The next five days were the more terrifying because they passed in an electric vacuum of insinuation, unrelieved by a single hint of what was to come. For a day and a night, Sam vanished and was replaced by Bart. Then it was four days of Silent Sam, for he answered no questions and made no response to the accusations hurled at him by a half-dozen voices echoing up and down the corridor.

He poked food on plastic trays through the slots without a word, his face a stony etching in frame for a moment before it slid from sight, not to be seen again until the next meal.

Then, on the fifth day since Stan discovered the plot, Sam did not appear with the evening meal. Even when the cell lights winked out, not a tray had been delivered. Nor was Sam to be seen at his usual perch at the end of the corridor, shotgun leaning against the wall beside him as he smoked an endless chain of cigarettes.

Stan exchanged speculations with Kinard, both shouted from the cell door and were answered only by calls from other cells, one of them identified as belonging to Barbara, fear-choked and hysterical. At last

all sounds died an unnatural death and there was nothing but the distant throb of what Stan had recently decided was a gasoline-powered generator.

When even that sound halted abruptly, all lights went out. There was a period of wall-pounding, door-rattling panic among the prisoners, followed by a still more startling silence.

"Don't you get it?" said Stan to Kinard, who was foolishly shouldering the cell door. "They've gone. They've all gone."

"You mean," said Kinard in an awed tone, "they've just gone off and left us locked up to starve and die?"

"Exactly," said Stan, experiencing a deep melancholy. With Barbara only a few feet removed down the corridor, he might never reach her. He stepped to the door beside Kinard and shouted, "Don't panic, Barbara! Keep calm. We'll find a way out!"

There was no reply but he heard a muffled sob. Wretched, he left the door and sprawled upon his bunk. Kinard came to sit woodenly at his feet. After a minute he sniffed and said, "Do you smell smoke?"

Stan lifted his head and took a breath. "No, same stale air, but no smoke. The only thing on fire is your imagination."

"Perhaps," said Kinard, "Just the

same, I did smell smoke and I wouldn't put it past them. Burn us to ashes, make it seem an accidental fire. Don't you see, it's the perfect answer!" His voice rose in tremendous alarm.

Stan was forced to take another sniff of air. Now was it *his* imagination, or did he also smell smoke?

"Smoke or not," he said, "don't go yelling 'fire'. These people would kill each other trying to break out."

"It's getting colder," Kinard grumbled. "They cut the heat so we'd freeze to death, and perhaps it didn't occur to you, Stan, but we're all gonna die in darkness. Whatever happens, we'll never know night from day."

"Ah, shut up, Kinard. You're getting on my nerves."

Folding his arms across himself to keep warm, Stan closed his eyes. Surprisingly, he slept. How long? Was it a minute or an hour? Something had awakened him, a sound he couldn't place. Then there was a distinct jangle of metal on the cell floor which he recognized instantly. He bounced up, colliding with Kinard, who was descending from the top bunk.

He stooped and felt around the floor. He came up with a large key in his fist. Pushing his arm through the door window and groping down, he was able to insert the

key and twist. The cell door opened.

"It's over, Dennis," he said quietly. "We're free."

He retrieved the key and, clutching Kinard by the arm, maneuvered up the corridor toward the front of the building. "We've got to find a light of some kind," he said at the connecting door between cellblock and office. "Even a match would help."

He found the door unlocked and shoved it open. They were greeted by the soft glow of a kerosine lantern atop Hamlin's desk. It cast flickering shadows about the empty room.

"Nice touch," Kinard muttered. "At the last second they went all soft and poured the milk of human kindness."

"Probably," Stan sneered, "it was Sam on the run. He just forgot his little old lantern, that's all."

They found nothing in the desks, not a scrap of paper in the filing cabinet. A heavy locker stood open, vacant, but on a table, coats and gloves had been piled. Even Barbara's expensive mink, by a fathomless quirk of human nature, had been left behind.

Stan went outside and peered into the darkness. The area was remote, surrounded by woods. In the distance, he could see a crumbling barn and a broken shack. He cir-

cled the building and returned. "It's nothing but a deserted farm," he reported. "Bunch of phony cops. They got away with everything—cars and all. We're on foot."

"Never mind," Kinard replied. "We're free!" He sounded almost happy.

Stan caught up the lantern. "C'mon, Dennis, let's go turn the captives loose!"

They stood beneath the cold glitter of stars, six men and five women grouped together in the winter darkness, Stan holding the lantern and hugging Barbara against him as they stared at the shadowy substation. The building appeared small and bleak and abandoned.

"We ought to burn it down," said Howard Stoneman, the falsely accused hit-run driver.

"No," Stan objected, "we'd only be burning evidence. And we'd be like the very animals we'll be hunting."

"Police'll handle this," Dennis said, "if we can find a real cop within a hundred miles."

"How far is it to town?" asked Stoneman.

"Sam said three miles, once we reach the highway," Stan replied. "If he wasn't lying, it should be about four miles and a half from this point."

"A miserable hike in this weath-

er," Kinard groaned to himself.

"I'll never make it in high heels," a woman whined.

"You'll make it if I have to carry you the whole way," a man answered.

"Well, then, let's get moving," said Stan.

Inside the ancient barn the bogus Sheriff Hamlin and his three accomplices, Floyd, Bart and Sam, stood in darkness, squinting out through the cracked, decaying boards. Their uniforms had been replaced by the overalls and jackets they wore when "police" operations were suspended. Presently, Hamlin was watching the receding glimmer of the lantern and beside him, greedy Sam was asking about the take.

"I got it all figured in my head," Hamlin announced. "Sixty grand from the six checks Sam got cleared through the bank, fifty-eight hundred cash if you include the traveler's checks we can forge. Watches, rings and assorted other loot come to about five big ones when you knock it down to what a fence will give us for the stuff."

"All told, less the rent on this beat-up farm, better than seventy grand, I'd say. Took nine days, so that's right on to eight grand a day."

"Man, them's swee-et pickin's!" Sam exclaimed joyously.

"Too bad we can't unload them big, shiny heaps," Floyd grumbled. "That would bring it close to a hundred grand, I reckon."

"Too risky," Hamlin said. "It's not our line, hot cars."

"Sure hate to just leave 'em here in the barn," said Bart woefully. "They'll come back and find 'em, sure enough."

"Only wanted to give us a little extra time by keepin' them suckers afoot, first place," Hamlin muttered. He stared out into the darkness where the lantern shimmered once more and vanished around a bend in the road.

"Okay," he said. "They're outta sight and you could bet your last buck it'll take at least a couple hours 'fore they can shoo the law down here from that three-cop town. By then we'll be in the next

state. So hop to it—let's roll it!"

The barn door was heaved wide, and Floyd drove out the fake patrol car, stripped of its markings. Sam closed the barn door and hopped in with the others. Then Floyd headed toward the sham substation where Hamlin ordered a halt. Sam went inside with a flashlight. Shortly he returned.

"Clean as a hound's tooth," he reported. "We didn't leave a clue nowhere." He paused. "That there is a nice, cozy little jail we done builded up. Darn shame—all that work for nothin'."

Hamlin snorted. "You call seventy grand nothin'? 'Sides, we can fake up any little ole house into another jail.

"C'mon, roll it, Floyd! Plenty more hayseed counties and city suckers just waitin' to be plucked."



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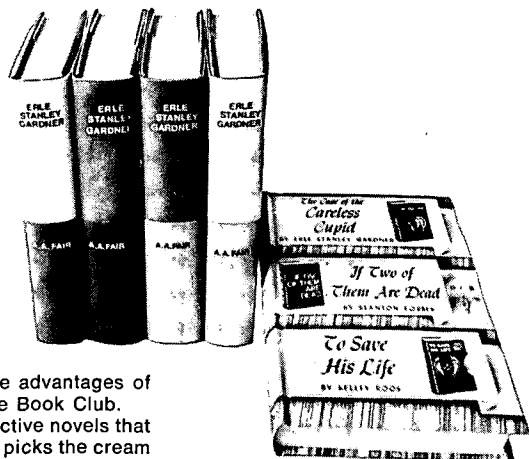
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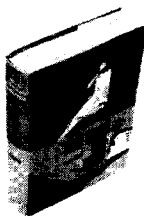
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